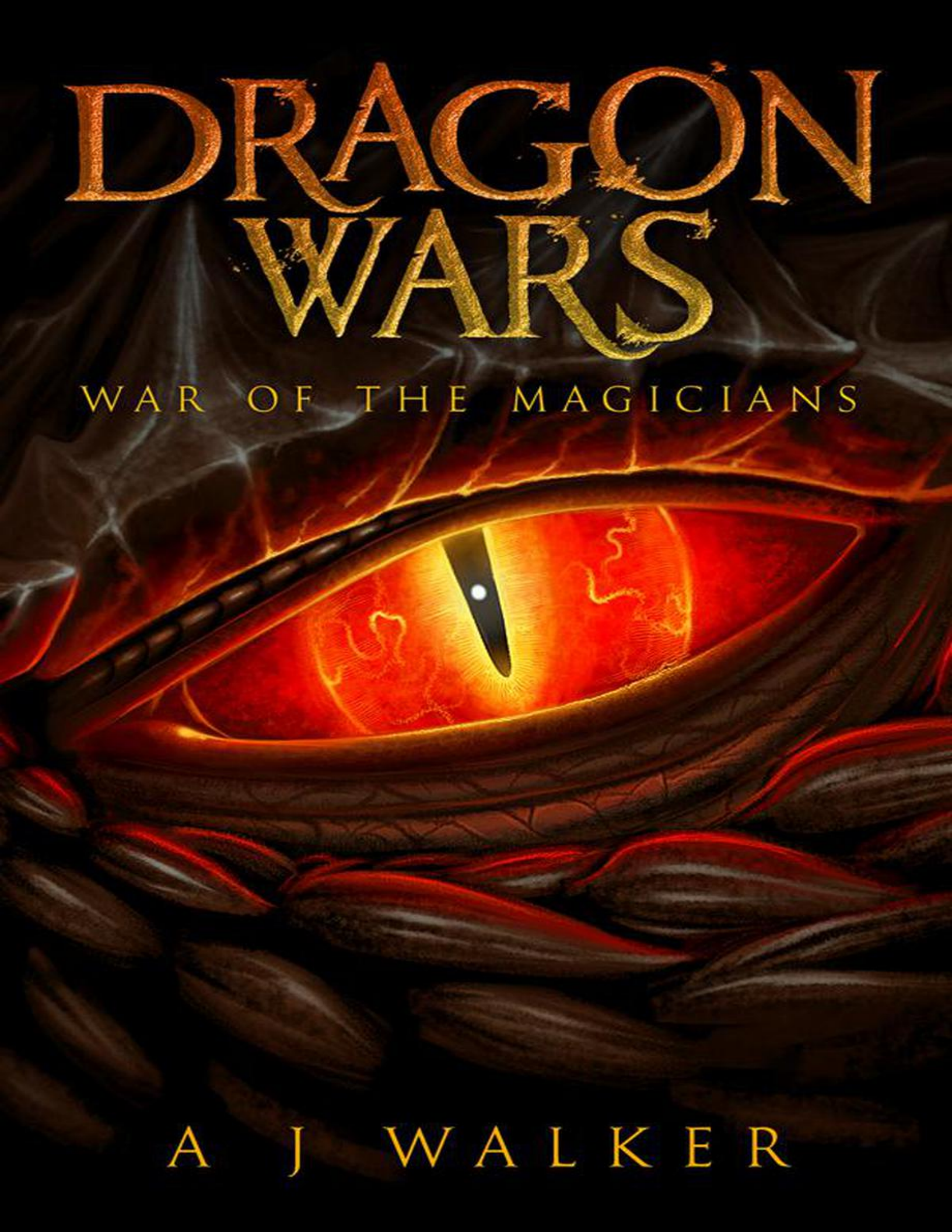


DRAGON WARS



WAR OF THE MAGICIANS

A J WALKER

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

DRAGON WARS: WAR OF THE MAGICIANS

First edition. October 22, 2018.

Copyright © 2018 A J Walker.

ISBN: 978-1386009481

Written by A J Walker.

Table of Contents

[Copyright Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Enjoy this book? CONTINUE ON TO THE NEXT ADVENTURE... | Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[ALSO BY A J WALKER | Have you read all the adventures based in Kartania? | In Bond of a Dragon Series](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[Sign up for A J Walker's Mailing List](#)



Chapter One

—

Merglan's Ride

MERGLAN LEANED FORWARD, HIS armored chestplate resting against the rigid scales of his dragon's neck. His dark eyes remained keenly fixed on the castle turrets rising high above the city walls. Dawn's cold air rushed over his face, the chill reddening his pale cheeks.

Keeping his focus on the sleeping castle, Merglan began to meld his mind with that of his dragon's, their separate consciousness combining into one seamless stream of thought. Merglan harnessed the energy flowing between their bond and guided it out over the capital city. When combined, the young sorcerer and his dragon's magic could be used to locate individuals with merely their minds. Sweeping through the vast collection of Kingston's citizens, Merglan searched for a select few. He felt the familiar burning of the King's thoughts, heavy with worldly decisions. King Kaufen and his throne were targets on Merglan's hit list, but that's not who he was currently searching for; he sought Kaufen's son—the prince.

Approaching from the north and flying low over the water, Merglan steered his dragon, Killdoor, over Kingston's port. The crimson sails of the royal navy lined the nation of Southland's chief port. Kaufen's ships glistened in the growing light of the rising sun. Resembling targets, the red cloth dotted the bay's shoreline. Merglan's mind shifted away from his search for the prince. The young sorcerer and his dragon had pinpointed the aims for their initial attack on the capital city.

Killdoor glided effortlessly toward the anchored ships below. Unhinging his jaws, he let loose a stream of fire that chased the shadows of dawn from the darkened port. The direct impact from the jetting flames burst the lead ship apart before igniting the rest of the fleet ablaze. Killdoor easily destroyed the remaining ships in Kaufen's naval fleet with three more passes of his dragon fire.

With a clack of his enormous jaws, the black dragon extinguished his lethal stream of fire. Merglan focused his mind back to locating the prince within the city walls. Most of Kingston's citizens remained asleep, with the exception of those who'd been rudely awakened by Killdoor's blaze. Merglan searched through the remaining minds within Kingston's walls, but couldn't locate his former friend.

Prince William and Merglan had grown up together in Kaufen's castle. Merglan's father was chief alchemist to the king. Since the prince and Merglan were so close in age, they spent most of their childhood playing together. Merglan considered him to be his closest friend. William often spoke of how they'd one day rule the kingdom side by side. He'd be William's right-hand man. They were meant to rule the world together, or so he thought. One day, William's attention became distracted when he met a girl and began to ignore his closest friend. It was innocent jealousy at first, but Merglan's thoughts quickly darkened. His hatred for the prince's fiancée grew as the two fell deeper in love.

Killdoor laughed with despicable elation as he flew over the city walls. His excitement for the destruction of humans had never thrilled him so much as this. Despite Merglan's frustrations for not being able to find the prince or his fiancée, he gained some satisfaction from Killdoor's sense of pure joy for destruction. If he couldn't locate the prince with his newfound powers, he'd have to do it the old-fashioned way, by storming the castle.

Steering him low over the wooden shingled houses, Merglan commanded Killdoor to let loose his will of death. Opening his mighty jaws once more, the dragon poured his flames like molten lava as they flew. The flames shone brightest from within Killdoor's throat as the brilliant display of electric green came jetting out from the rear of his mouth. The tight spit of flames then turned white before the blue that leapt out past his fangs. Next, the terrible orange-and-red flames billowed twice the length of his enormous black body and washed over the buildings below.

Merglan, blinded by hatred, cared little for the lives of the people who they were affecting. He'd made up his mind the moment he'd left Kingston those two years ago. If his closest friend could betray him for the whims of a pathetic, weak-willed girl, then all hope was lost for the kingdom.

A grin grew wide across Merglan's face as he heard the frenzied ringing of the castle's warning bells. The high-pitched sounds had never been so kind to Merglan's ears. He welcomed the alarms, rejoicing in his long-awaited homecoming.

As Killdoor continued to set the city ablaze, Merglan steered him toward Kaufen's castle. Approaching the castle walls near the center of Kingston, Merglan could see the king's guards assembling along the battlements. He felt them with his mind as they made ready their bows. Killdoor chuckled as they flew closer, knowing full well that the arrows

shot by the humans couldn't harm him through his thick scales. They were as good as dead.

Merglan felt the drawing of hundreds of bows as the archers took aim in their direction. During his training with Killdoor in Northland, he learned to use his magic so he could easily deflect a host of arrows raining down on him, but Merglan came up with a more unique solution to extinguish the threat.

Gathering a large store of combined energy from Killdoor, Merglan focused his mind on the taut string of every bowman along the battlements. When Killdoor drew near enough to draw their fire, Merglan released the focused channel of energy. A resounding twang came from the bows. The archers never got their chance to fire; Merglan had used his power to cut every string in two, sending many of the unsuspecting archers stumbling back in surprise.

Merglan loosed a wicked laugh as Killdoor showered the castle walls with flames. He knocked down portions of the charred wall as they flew beyond, his large tail plowing through the top of the castle's defenses.

Killdoor came booming down, landing hard in the center of the castle's courtyard. The stone slabs cracked and shifted under the weight of his muscular body. Many guards standing by, armed and at the ready, fled in fear when they laid eyes on the enormous dragon. Killdoor expelled a vicious roar and washed the courtyard in plumes of fire. Those unable to escape his wrath were charred to a crisp in his deadly wake.

Merglan dismounted the black dragon and strode across the familiar courtyard with purpose. He swept the castle once more with his mind, searching for William or his fiancée, but the only foe he recognized was Southland's worthless King—King Kaufen. He marched toward the main entrance of the castle's keep and placed a hand on the door, trying to force it open. The doors didn't budge.

Does that old fool really think barring the doors will deter me? The nerve, Merglan said sarcastically to Killdoor through their connected minds.

He sighed with disappointment and took several steps back. Spreading his legs shoulder width apart, he braced himself. Merglan lifted his palm, stretching it out past his chest. He closed his eyes as he summoned the energy within him. Pressing his arm forward in a rapid motion, a wave of white energy flowed from the heel of his palm, spreading like lightning into the keep's wooden doors. When the energy collided with the wood, it

pulverized the stout slabs into a vast array of splinters that flew violently into the keep.

A crowd of armed soldiers inside the keep's entrance was met by the burst of wooden shrapnel. The few left standing and unharmed by the explosion charged at the young sorcerer, shouting as they wielded their swords high above their heads. Merglan stepped calmly through the destroyed entrance as they rushed closer. He didn't bother reaching for his blade, but rather snapped their necks with a twist of his wrist. The men fell instantly to the ground.

Stepping over the bodies of the dead men, Merglan recalled from memory where the royal family's chambers were. He climbed the stairs leading him closer to William's room, encountering several groups of castle guards along the way. Dispatching them in the same way he'd killed the remaining soldiers in the entrance hall, Merglan continued his hunt for the prince.

He came to a halt outside William's bedroom door. Memories from his childhood flashed through his head. Angrily brushing them aside, he kicked in the door with his heavy boot. Finding the same results as his mental search, the prince was nowhere to be found. From the look of the emptied closet and chests, he'd left some time ago and was truly not hiding within the city walls.

"Agh!" Merglan voiced with rage. Storming from the prince's room, Merglan was about to leave the royal chambers when a sudden noise caught his attention. He reached out with his mind and discovered Kaufen's presence in the next room down the hall.

Merglan loathed the King almost as much as the prince. Kaufen often kept Merglan's father so busy with his work as an alchemist that he never had a moment for his son. More infuriating was the king's endorsement for the prince to marry the girl William had become so enthralled with.

King Kaufen had let his grip on the three nations of humanity loosen with his old age. The Rollo Islands had named their chief as their leader and Westland had all but stopped sending young men for the King's troops. Kaufen had spent too much time away from the battlefield and allowed the lesser Kingdoms to begin to govern themselves. Merglan knew an iron fist must rule if the King were to remain in control of the three nations.

He strode the short distance to the room the King had locked himself in. He held up his palm once more and was about to summon the energy to

shatter the door to pieces like he'd done in the keep, when he realized how many people that stunt had killed. If he were going to kill the king, he at least wanted to see the look in Kaufen's eyes as he took his life. Instead of releasing the energy through his palm, he brought his fingers into a tight ball as he formed a fist. Rapping his knuckles in quick succession on the wooden door, Merglan listened for a response. After a moment of hesitation, he could hear several pairs of feet shuffling and the hushed whispers.

Soon, the King's muffled voice came through the door, "Who is it?"

Merglan raised his voice so the King could hear him clearly through the wooden barrier, "It's Merglan!" After a moment's pause, he added, "Didn't you recognize me with my new dragon or have you forgotten about me after two years away from the castle?"

"Merglan? You left two weeks ago, and without notice. Suddenly you come back with a dragon, causing chaos and destruction to my city. Have you lost your mind, boy?!" the King shouted.

Kaufen's recollection caused Merglan to hesitate; he'd been gone for two years. He ventured north to the land where no one had ever returned. He met Killdoor and the Norfolk. They'd trained him in the arts of magic after he and Killdoor became bonded. Surely that couldn't have all happened in two weeks time.

He shook off the King's words as a mere trick to elude him and continued, "I'm not a fool, Kaufen. I won't fall for your tricks. Now open this door, or else!"

"Merglan, where is your reason? Why are you doing this?"

"You are a plague on this kingdom! You've let the other nations rise to their own power and they're going to secede from our rule. You and your son must pay for what you've done!" Merglan growled hatefully. He took a step back from the doorway, wrapping his fist as if it were around the door handle. He released the energy he'd summoned, pulling it off its hinges. He sidestepped the door as it flew past him, slamming with a loud thud into the stone hallway behind him.

Kaufen stood shocked amidst a dozen armed guards that surrounded him. Merglan slid into the doorway as he locked eyes with the king.

"Kill the traitor!" Kaufen ordered his men through clenched teeth.

The guards drew their swords and ran toward Merglan. He stood, legs splayed in the entranceway, fearless. The young sorcerer brandished his

sword for the first time since he'd began his attack on the city. With inhuman speed, his blade flicked and danced gracefully as he blocked and slashed at Kaufen's men. Within seconds, Merglan had slain the King's guards with the precision and skill of a veteran swordsman.

A look of horror crossed Kaufen's face as he realized Merglan was not the same person he'd been two weeks prior, when he left the castle in a spit of rage. The alchemist's son had changed, becoming filled with hatred during his brief absence.

The noble King met his enemy with pride. Drawing his blade from its scabbard, Kaufen said, "You might wear this crown, but you'll never be King."

Merglan narrowed his eyes, pausing for a moment. Leaping forward, he attacked, the tip of his sword piercing the King's heart. As he watched the life fade from Kaufen's eyes, Merglan stole the crown from the dying king's head.

Merglan held the crown in his hand as he descended the steps from the royal chambers. When he came into view of the entrance hall, a single man stood in the room. Surrounded by the bodies of the dead soldiers, the cloaked man concealed his identity with his deep hood. Merglan hesitated for a moment; he couldn't register who the man was by using his mind. Whoever it was had been trained to seal off their thoughts from sorcerers like him. He could sense the extent of his powers were nothing compared to that of his own and Killdoor, so Merglan continued down the stone steps.

"Move," Merglan commanded the hooded man as he approached him. The man shifted his weight, but did not move. "You'll move out of my way if you know what's good for you."

Before Merglan could act on removing the man from his path, the stranger revealed his identity. Gray-haired and balding, the familiar wrinkled face of his father, Kaufen's alchemist, stood between him and the keep's entrance.

"Father?" Merglan said surprised.

"Merglan, listen to me. Whatever you're doing you must stop at once."

Still in shock from the sight of his father, Merglan hesitated, unable to say anything in response.

"That will never bring you joy, not the way in which you've taken it," his father said, pointing to the crown still clutched in Merglan's left hand.

Merglan found his anger once more, allowing him to speak his mind, “What do you know of my desires?” he spat.

“I know there is a hole in your heart; a hole I created. Let me help you,” he pleaded, holding his hands out at his sides.

“So now you want to pretend to be my father. Now that I’ve become powerful, you want to be there for me?”

“I’ve not been the best father to you, Son, but I’m here now. Come; don’t let the darkness consume you.” He stepped closer to his son, arms spread wide in offering for an embrace.

Merglan awkwardly leaned in to receive his father’s hug. As he did so, Merglan let the tip of his blade rise. He stuck it slowly into his father’s midsection. The blade slid effortlessly through flesh as Merglan drew him in with one arm around his back. Twisting the sword with a spin of his wrist, he held his father’s head next to his. Hot blood trickled onto his sword hand as he whispered into his ear, “You’re too late, Father. I am the darkness.”

He released his grip, kicking the alchemist off his sword and sending him falling to the floor. With one swift motion, he stabbed his father in the heart, bringing him to a swift and bitter end. Stepping over the dead body, Merglan placed the king’s crown atop his head and exited the keep.

Killdoor waited patiently for his counterpart among the charred wreckage and smoldering bodies in the courtyard. He dropped a shoulder low to the ground, allowing Merglan to climb atop him easily. Together, they took flight in the bright dawn of a new day. He could easily see the wreckage they’d caused to the city during early morning’s light. Killdoor flew low as Merglan displayed their triumphant victory to the people of Kingston. He made sure to pass over them low enough so they could clearly see the crown shining on his brow.

Coming to land once more in the charred courtyard of the castle, Merglan entered the keep for a second time. This time he and Killdoor met no resistance. He strode confidently across the keep and flung open the doors to the throne room. At the far end of the room, the gilded chair sat unoccupied. Merglan sauntered up to the iconic symbol of power and sat down squarely. He nestled into his new position of power as the self-proclaimed King of the human race.



Chapter Two

Theodor

THEODOR STRODE DOWN THE cobbled streets of his hometown along Southland's northern coast. A chill from the morning breeze wafted in off the ocean. The familiar smell of fresh fish being brought to market filled his nostrils as the wind ruffled the sand-colored locks around his neck. The odor was a stinging reminder of how much he would miss this place over the coming months. He loved living in Lubrecht and didn't want to leave.

The long summer days were drawing to an end as the season changed and autumn began to settle in. Since the death of the King, a great war had begun enveloping nearly all of Kartania, and however desperately Theodor wanted nothing to do with it, his father told him otherwise. The sorcerer who'd killed the King and taken control of Kingston had become occupied elsewhere in Kartania and had not returned to the capital city for some time. After several months, the regent who was elected to take control of Southland in the King's stead had begun rebuilding the king's army. When word reached his father's ears that the regent was calling for anyone willing and able to serve for their cause, he offered his son at the drop of a hat. Theodor's father had served when he was younger, so in his eyes, it was his only son's turn to carry on the legacy in their country's time of need.

Theodor suspected it didn't help his cause to stay in Lubrecht due to the recent scandal of his eldest sister running away. She'd broken all honorable norms and family tradition when she suddenly ran away with some wealthy lord that was passing through, or so the rumors had said. Lubrecht was a quiet town where the people didn't waver from tradition. When word got out about Theodor's sister, his mother and father hung their heads in shame as the others in the community spread rumors of how horrible they must've been to create such a devilish child. If Theodor refused his father's wishes to serve at the nearest army training camp, then he'd bring further stain to their family that likely wouldn't be removed for generations to come.

With his travel pack full, Theodor carried everything he needed for his journey west, to the nearest army training camp. Sleeping blankets, food, buckskin flask for water, change of clothes, flint and steel, and some fishing supplies were all stuffed into the torso-sized pack. He decided to bring

along his wool coat as well, which added significant weight and bulk to the pack, but fall had come and he would need the extra warmth in the increasingly chilly evenings. Besides, the extra weight would only strengthen his legs as he walked across the northern terrain of Southland. The only weapon his father gifted to him was his buck-knife, the steel blade sharp and the length of his middle finger. He wore it around his belt like a sword, knowing full well that he didn't know the first thing about self-defense. At the very least, he could gut and fillet the fish he planned on catching along the way.

At sixteen years old, military recruiters had approached Theodor for the first time. Several months before the King's death, they'd come to his school and set up an obstacle course. When they saw how fast he'd completed it, the recruiters wanted him to join their introductory leadership program held in Kingston. His first reaction was to refuse them, but they offered a healthy purse for completion of the program. When he told them he'd need time to think it over, word spread through his school and he began to receive the interest of girls. Theodor had never had this attention before and began to think perhaps the army was the right place for him. After realizing, however, that the females pining over him were only in it for his money and power, Theodor changed his mind. He knew the military mindset wasn't suited for him. He didn't take orders well. The brief time he'd entertained the notion seemed so foreign. Now the thought of being in the military terrified him.

Theodor stopped when he reached the end of the cobblestones, where the road turned to dirt and lead west toward Kingston. He looked over his shoulder at the adobe-style houses capped with clay shingles, and sighed.

I'm young, and like my father always says, 'Adventure is how you grow as a person.' I think I might be more inclined to leave if I knew the camp wasn't an all-male military base. Maybe there's a girls training camp nearby I can visit? he thought as he looked back at the houses lining each side of Lubrecht's main street. He faced the dirt road ahead, continuing toward his destination several days away.



WHAT WAS THAT? Theodor whispered to himself. He lay wrapped tightly in his wool-sleeping blanket, eyes peeled. The once crackling fire he used

to cook his bland rice and bean dinner had burned through the remaining wood and smoldered, glowing a dull orange.

His thoughts quickly turned to the warning his father had given him — “Keep an eye out for anyone not loyal to the crown. These are dangerous times and many enemies lurk along the Kingston Road.” Theodor had heard rumors of how the powerful sorcerer cast spells on people, forcing them to obey his commands and serve his cause.

Suddenly, he heard it again; a branch snapping on the forest floor.

That wasn't just a twig breaking, he thought. That was a large stick. Whatever it is, it's sizable and walking this way through the shadows.

Theodor sat upright, the blanket he slept in still wrapped tightly around his body. Searching through the darkness, he looked for the source of the noise. His imagination leapt wildly as he allowed himself to believe that a band of robbers, or possibly a group of evil magicians was out there, lurking in the shadows.

This is just my luck. Robbed before I made it more than a day from home, he thought as he focused in on a peculiar-looking shadow.

Suddenly, several large branches snapped all at once, making Theodor leap to his feet. Dropping the blanket to the ground, he readied himself for whatever would come out from behind the shadows. As he stood shirtless in the cold of night, he heard steady breathing coming from beyond the darkened trees. It was the kind of breathing that comes thick and heavy in the quiet of the night and sent chills down Theodor's spine.

From behind the blanket of shadows, Theodor caught a glimpse of the dark shape approaching. The shadowed figure moved with awkward stammering, drunkenly wavering back and forth. He didn't recognize the figure to be human as it lumbered out from behind the shadows. To his surprise, Theodor saw a large bear walking with its muzzle down, steadily sniffing the ground. The bear's fur blended almost seamlessly with the dark of night. Theodor knew the large animal had caught his scent as it quickened its pace coming closer into camp.

Theodor nearly cursed out loud before biting his tongue, preventing himself from making too much noise. He quickly and carefully snuck to the closest tree behind him. Scrambling up the large tree, he could hear the approaching bear discovering his camp.

I'd almost prefer a band of robbers to this, he thought as he climbed high into the tree, making sure the bear couldn't get to him from the ground.

I should've grabbed my shirt, he thought as he watched the large black bear locate his bedding. He thumped himself on the thigh in frustration as he crouched on a thick branch, midway up the tall tree.

The bear nosed its way through Theodor's blankets, tossing them to the side as it ran its dark snout along the ground where Theodor had been sleeping. He watched helplessly from his branch as the bear rooted out his travel pack. The pack held everything he would need to arrive safely at the training camp, including all his food.

The bear placed its large paw on his pack and rolled it playfully like a kitten with a fresh toy. Biting down on the canvas fabric, the bear used its jaws and powerful claws to tear open the pack. After tearing open a hole large enough to place its head inside, the bear reached in with its muzzle and pulled out Theodor's tarp. Dragging the tarp from the innards of his pack, the bear cut large slices as it shook the tarp violently and raked its claws along his makeshift shelter.

He knew the bear had discovered his food when he saw it poke its large dark head into the side of his pack and remain there for several long breaths. The bear clawed out what food supplies remained and bit into them with its powerful jaws. Theodor watched helplessly as the bear devoured his food mere minutes after finding it.

Now what am I going eat?

The bear didn't leave right away after finishing his food. Instead, it searched the ground once again, finding its way to the bottom of the tree Theodor was hiding in. Its snout sniffed up the trunk of the tree as the bear craned its neck. Theodor found himself looking right into the bear's eyes as it peered up from the ground below, its nostrils flaring as it smelled the air between them. Theodor held his breath and tried not to move, but the bear had seen him. Theodor shifted uncomfortably as the bear used the tree trunk to walk itself into a standing position.

With its front paws resting on the tree, Theodor wondered, *Can bears climb trees?* A moment of panic flooded his mind as he watched the large bear attempt to lift itself off the ground. Each time it placed all four paws onto the tree's base, it slid down, the heft of the beast outmatching the strength of its claws.

After several unsuccessful attempts to climb the tree, the bear switched tactics. It placed its front paws against the tree, but instead of climbing it, pushed hard, shaking the tree with the heavy momentum of its body.

The darn thing is trying to knock me down.

Theodor held on tightly as the large bear violently shook the tree. Discovering the tree wasn't going to fall over and Theodor wasn't going to fall out, the bear returned to all fours and gave up. Theodor hoped that, since the bear had already eaten his food and realized he wouldn't be coming out of the tree, it would leave. The bear, however, didn't leave. It sat back on its hindquarters and gawked up at him with wanting eyes.

Oh, so it's the waiting game you want to play, Theodor thought. *I can stay up here all night.* He shivered as the cool autumn air brushed across his bare chest. *Or can I?* His exposed skin rose slightly as small goose bumps ran the course of his body. *It's going to be a long night.*

The coldest hour came just before the dawn. That hour proved to be the most difficult. Unwilling to climb down from his perch until he knew the bear was out of the area, Theodor winced as he rubbed his numb hands over his exposed skin, trying to rub away the shivering chills pulsing through his body. Unable to get a good night's rest, he patiently waited for the morning sun and the heat of a new day.

As the first inklings of light revealed the dark outlines of trees surrounding him, Theodor was relieved to see the bear's long-awaited absence from the area below. Despite his eagerness to come down from his hiding place, Theodor waited until it was bright enough to fully see his surroundings. He wanted to know that the bear had actually vacated the area. With the coast clear, he climbed down to safety.

Relief washed over him as he dug through his torn travel pack and pulled out the wool cloak. Giving it a quick inspection, Theodor was pleased to find it undamaged. Luckily, the bear tore into the pack just below where the cloak had been stored. After spending a cold autumn night shirtless and up a tree, he honestly would've been relieved to wear anything that covered his frost-nipped skin, but it was a pleasant surprise indeed to find his cloak fully intact. Theodor wrapped it tightly around himself and began to retrieve the items of his disheveled campsite.

His movements at first were slow and sluggish, but as the blood began to flow more quickly through his veins, his core temperature rose. The skin of his chest and back tingled with the sensation of numerous sharp needles pricking him repeatedly. The stinging lasted far longer than he'd expected and made him want to crawl out of his skin rather than spend one more moment with the unpleasant feeling. After several minutes of shouting in

pain and attempting to shake off the feeling, his nerves returned to normal and the stinging vanished. After gathering the dispersed contents of his camp and placing them precariously back into the torn travel pack, Theodor abandoned the wooded area, eager to distance himself from the short-lived campsite.

Several miles down the road, Theodor's stomach grumbled. Placing his hand tentatively on his unruly belly, he groaned, "I need something to eat." The bear managed to find every last crumb of the food he'd packed. Luckily the bear hadn't damaged any of his fishing supplies.

Glancing to the leeward side of the road, a slight ray of morning sun caught his eye as the light glimmered brightly off the rippling surface of a stream below. The time of day was just right for trout to be feeding, as the heat of the day wasn't yet bearing down on him. He stepped off the road, making his way toward the increasingly pleasing sound of moving water.

Curious to see if the effort of rigging a makeshift fishing pole would be worth it, Theodor watched to see if any fish were feeding on the water's surface. As he scanned the flowing stream, he made note of the several types of bugs flying low over the water. Hearing a sequence of splashing to his right, Theodor turned just in time to see the rippling rings expanding out in perfect circles from where the fish had risen to eat the bugs on the surface.

His heart rose at the sight and he thought, *This will most certainly do.*

Finding a cluster of willows wasn't difficult, as the edges of the stream were teaming with them. He cut a thin, flexible branch from one of them with the knife his father gave him and pulled out the fishing supplies from his pack. He'd brought enough line and flies to last him twice as long as he needed. Attaching a small homemade fly that resembled one of the bugs hatching along the water's edge, Theodor tied off the opposite end to his willow branch.

As he approached the bend in the stream where the fish were rising, he made sure to keep his distance from the water's edge, disguising his presence from the fish. Fixing his eyes on a slow-moving patch of water just upstream from where he stood, Theodor flung his string out over the water and watched as the homemade fly landed lightly on the surface. He held his breath while it drifted down, passing several feet from the stream's bank. After only a few moments on the water's surface, a fish rose, taking the bait. Theodor's hunger and excitement got the better of him and he

yanked hard hoping to have the trout on the other end. To his disappointment he'd pulled too hard, jerking the fly right out of the fish's mouth. This small failure only fueled his determination to hook another.

After several more casts and no immediate signs of interest from the trout, a second fish rose to his fly. This time he let the fish take it under the surface of the water before pulling up with the willow branch pole. As he lifted the tip, the string grew tight and he knew he'd hooked the fish. It pulled in every direction, wriggling wildly and trying to propel itself through the water. It ran up, and then downstream, diving deeper as it tried to escape. Suddenly he felt the fish turn its head back toward the surface and it leapt completely out of the water, flopping back and forth as it soared into the air. Falling back into the water with a splash, the fish fought to free itself.

Theodor laughed as he tried to keep the string tight so the fish wouldn't come off. He stepped backward, dragging the wriggling fish through the water and up onto the grassy shore. Keeping tension on the string, he pulled the fish closer to him, crouching as it came closer. Quickly, he grabbed the fish by the gills and lifted it up to examine his meal. Shimmering with vibrant green along its spine, the trout's scales turned pink toward its midline and white on its underbelly. From nose to tail, the fish was about as long as his forearm and would be plenty to fill his belly. He smiled as he carried the trout back to the side of the road.

Gathering a heap of dried twigs and sticks, he made a small fire. Within a matter of minutes, he had the trout on a wooden spit, and roasted it over the orange flames. Reveling in his success, Theodor devoured every edible part of the creature, letting the nutrients re-energize his tired body.

Continuing along the road to the army training camp, Theodor came across several travelers passing him in the opposite direction. Each time he nodded and smiled, trying to show them he was not a troublemaker. It wasn't until late in the day that a band of traveling musicians overtook him, heading west as he was. After introducing himself and informing them of his reasons for being on the road, the cheerful group of minstrels invited him to join their party. Since they were heading in the same direction as he was and seemed friendly enough, Theodor accepted their offer of companionship.

Before they'd gone too far down the road, Theodor recounted to them his trouble with the bear and that the only way he'd be able to contribute for

food was if he caught them some fish. Seeing he'd been physically unharmed by the bear, the musicians laughed about his unfortunate encounter and offered him a fair share of the food as long as he lent a helping hand with the camp chores. Theodor didn't mind swapping chores for much-needed food, so he gladly vowed to help out with whatever they needed him to do.

Three days came and went as Theodor traveled along the Kingston Road with his new companions. In that short time, Theodor had quickly become an expert on roasting trout. He'd managed to catch enough fish to host a feast for the merry band of minstrels each morning and night. They would burst out in song each time he returned to camp with a stick full of trout hanging by their gills.

After a while, the group halted atop a rise in the road. Theodor slouched when he saw the barricaded walls of the military training camp nestled at the base of the hill. He took in a long, slow breath as he realized the end of his travels had finally come. He thanked the minstrels for their company and hospitality. They returned his thanks with gratitude for all of the roasted fish he'd cooked for them and his help with chores. He waved them goodbye as they continued on the road toward Kingston.

Theodor's gaze returned to the army encampment below, *I wonder if there's a fishing division in the army*, he hoped as he dragged his feet toward camp, wishing his father hadn't forced him into service.



Chapter Three

Bunkhouse Thirteen

HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE GATHERED outside the fortified walls of the army encampment. Today was the last of the three days that the king's army would be accepting new recruits for this session. If he didn't make it there before today he would have to wait eight weeks until they began another round of training. Part of Theodor wished he'd just continued on the road with the merry group of musicians, but the voice of his reluctant father replayed in his thoughts, and he dismissed the fantasy.

Beside the thick, log-walled entrance to the fortified camp stood armor-plated soldiers, their iron breastplates trimmed in the crimson colors of Southland. As he approached the long line of men waiting to gain entrance, Theodor spotted several archers pacing the length of the front wall. Directing his attention to three young men at the rear of the line, Theodor came to stand behind them in waiting. He overheard them speculating about Merglan's spies posing among them to try and gain entrance.

"They'll be tryin' to learn what techniques and strategies we're learnin' so as to outwit us in battle. You can't ever be too careful, not these days," he heard one of them say.

Theodor thought that might be a bit extreme. If he really wanted to discover what techniques and battle strategies they were teaching, Merglan could just fly on his dragon and take a look for himself. This was, after all, a war...with sorcerers.

Despite his doubts, he eyed the crowd warily, taking note of anyone who looked suspicious. As he gauged each individual in the crowded line, he caught the glare of a particularly rough-looking individual. The glare the man gave him in return chilled Theodor to the bone. He quickly put on a half-hearted smile and nodded politely, attempting to avoid any confrontation. When the man's gaze remained firm, he averted his attention to the back of the man's shirt in front of him. He cursed himself for scowling at the stranger and hoped nothing more would come of it when he felt a thick finger tap him on his left shoulder.

Theodor recoiled with regret. He slowly turned to face the stranger. As he did, he kept his eyes half closed, cringing, expecting an angry fist to fly at his nose.

“Hello,” a friendly voice said. “Do you always look like you’re trying to pinch a loaf?”

Theodor relaxed a bit and opened his eyes to see lad of similar age and slightly taller.

“Hi there, my name is Ivan. What’s yours?” the young man said, extending his hand in greetings.

The lad’s hair curled down in loose waves coming to rest just above his broad shoulders, much like Theodor’s. His hair was several shades darker than Theodor’s and his muscles more defined. There was a certain friendliness about him that Theodor instantly found comforting. His clothes were ragged and there was a thick layer of filth caked on him. If it weren’t for his tattered look and the horrid stench on him, Theodor would have mistaken the young man for someone of importance.

“Theodor,” he said with a smile, gripping Ivan’s hand firmly. “Looks like you’ve been on the road for a while,” he noted as he eyed the young man from head to toe.

Ivan lowered his gaze, surprise coming across his dirty face as if he were seeing himself for the first time, “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Where are you from?” Ivan asked.

“I’m from...” he paused as if he needed to think about his response.

When Ivan didn’t reply and the expression on his face screamed confusion, Theodor asked, “Cat got your tongue?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just... um, Willsahl, yeah, I’m from Willsahl,” he said, nodding to add some confident reassurance to his claim.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Oh sure, yeah. Good ol’ Willsahl,” he said chuckling and running a hand through his greasy hair. “What about you?”

“Lubrecht,” Theodor replied.

“What’s it like there?” he asked before Theodor could inquire anything more about Ivan.

“Not much to say about it really,” he said honestly. “Small farming community. There are some sheep herders and cattle ranchers, but mostly crop growers in those parts.”

“So, how did you come to be here? Get tired of life on the farm?” Ivan asked.

“I did well in the obstacle courses, you know the ones they set up at the schools. They told me I could come and sign up as soon as I wanted, but it

wasn't my first choice so I didn't come right away," Theodor sniffled and scuffed the ground with his boot. "When my father found out about how the king's army was recruiting again, he told me if I didn't go, he would disown me. Seeing as I'm the last chance at restoring some honor to our family's reputation, and I'd lose my right to inherit the farm, I obeyed my father's commands."

"Sheesh, that's pretty harsh," Ivan said with a cringe. "No pressure, right?" he joked.

Theodor sighed, "Yeah, no pressure."

"Don't worry, buddy," Ivan said as he slapped him hard on the shoulder. "I'll make sure you get through this place alright."

"Thanks," Theodor said, but didn't hold much hope for the jovial lad. Covered in several weeks' worth of filth and the only person within nose-shot that smelled worse than the latrines, Ivan wasn't exactly someone who Theodor saw as his champion. Yet, beyond the stench and layers of grime, he felt comforted by the young man's confidence.

Theodor waited in awkward silence, not knowing if he should continue his rather strange chat with Ivan or wait patiently, eavesdropping on the others in front of him. After an uncomfortably long wait, he reached the front of the check-in line. Upon the verification of his family crest, which he'd hastily stuffed into his front pants' pocket, he was issued: one pair of slightly worn leather boots, two pairs of wool pants, two short-sleeved shirts, and army-grade sleeping blankets which were, in fact, much less warm than his personal bed roll. Once he'd collected his belongings, he was assigned a cot in bunkhouse thirteen. To his surprise, Ivan passed through check-in quicker than expected. It seemed odd that the filthy lad who had struggled to recall what town he hailed from could provide his proof of documentation with such speed. Running to join him, Ivan caught up before Theodor had made it more than ten yards beyond the check-in station.

"Bunkhouse thirteen?" Theodor heard Ivan's familiar voice ask as he came to walk in stride with him.

"Yeah."

"Looks like we're going to be bunkmates," Ivan said as he parted his lips into a smile and threw his arm around Theodor, sending the foul aroma of body odor in his direction.

"Great," Theodor replied apprehensively as he turned his face away from Ivan's armpit.

After acquainting themselves with bunkhouse thirteen, Theodor set out to familiarize himself with the rest of the camp within the wooden fortress walls. He wanted to know where important locations, like the dining hall, latrines, and bathhouse were located before he began his first day of training on the morrow.

That evening, when Theodor was served a plate of slop for dinner, an unexpected stranger joined him. There was something familiar about how the young man was speaking to him and it took him several moments to recognize that it was Ivan, clean cut and properly dressed.

“My god, Ivan!” Theodor exclaimed, cutting Ivan off mid-sentence. Dropping the mouth full of slop back onto his plate, he said, “I’ve been sitting here this whole time trying to figure out who you were.”

Ivan chuckled jollily, “It was that bad, huh?”

“Yeah, you’re nearly a different person.”

“Pretty amazing what a shave, a bar of soap, and some hot water can do.”

“Not to mention the new duds,” Theodor awed. “Where did you get those?” He leaned over the table to feel the silk shirt Ivan was wearing, but Ivan slapped his hand away.

“I was saving them for when I arrived. I had two pair of clothes—a travel set and a camp set.”

“Well you sure camp in style,” Theodor said as he spooned up some slop.

As they got to chatting, Theodor decided he liked Ivan, but not because he’d changed his clothes and cleaned up, although that did help with being able to hold a conversation with him and not need to turn away to get a fresh breath of air. It was something else. He had a quality about him that Theodor admired. Together they made their way back to bunkhouse thirteen and bid each other good evening. Theodor relished this one last night of relaxation before training began.

The following day set the tone for what Theodor could expect from the remaining six weeks of basic military training. That day, and each one to follow, began with an arduous early morning run. Usually five or six miles, the run would be completed in forty-five minutes. After they returned from their morning jog, the trainees were given five minutes to wash up. Once clean and ready for the day to begin, they were allowed ten minutes to eat breakfast, served in the dining hall.

Exactly one hour after having left for their morning jog, the formal military training began. Classroom-style scenarios and lessons were taught in the dining hall. Experienced soldiers from the king's army taught battle strategies, line formations, and proper use of weapons. Food was strictly forbidden during lecture time, a lesson that more than one trainee had to be reminded of on the first day.

Lunch offered a half-hour break and was promptly followed by physical training for the remainder of the day. The afternoon sessions consisted of one-on-one combat training, practicing and drilling commands during a battle scenario, and more often than not, running an obstacle course.

Shortly after sunset, the recruits were given a full hour for dinner. At their first dinner, Theodor learned that this was the time where overconfident individuals would brag of their prowess during the physical training. After their luxurious hour-long dinner, everyone returned to his or her dorms and lights-out came a short fifteen minutes after mealtime's end.

The rules of camp were simple—if anyone were late coming back from the morning run, for mealtime, or for trainings, they were given extra exercises. These 'penalties', as the training officers called them, were to be performed in front of everyone during lecture hours. If anyone slept in or stayed out of their bunkhouses past lights-out, they were whipped. After a whipping, the whipped were still expected to perform their duties along with everyone else as though the lashing had never occurred.

Needless to say, Theodor did a lot of extra exercises during the first week of training. He didn't, however, have any problems waking up early or going to bed on time. He was already used to an early-to-bed and early-to-rise lifestyle from the farm back home in Lubrecht. His struggle came with finishing the morning run in forty-five minutes or less. Due to his tardiness, he had to skip most breakfasts and wasn't accustomed to beginning his day with a lack of energy. By early afternoon he was too exhausted for the physical training, and became utterly useless during the drills. After only a few long days at camp, Theodor discovered what he already knew to be true—he wasn't cut out to be a soldier; he wanted to go home.



DURING DINNER ON THE sixth day of camp, the training officers announced that the members of each dorm would become their own squad

for the remaining five weeks of training. Several of Theodor's bunkmates eyed him angrily, griping that they'd be forced to continue training with him. The groans grew even louder when they announced that each squad would be tested at the end of every two weeks. The top three squads would gain more time to eat during meals, granting them a shorter distance to run in each morning and less time in the classroom. Likewise, the three squads who scored the lowest would have to run farther each morning, decreasing their likelihood of getting a full meal in before lessons began, and likely meaning more penalty exercises to perform in front of the camp.

Theodor hung his head, averting his eyes as he sipped at the bowl of soup before him, while the other members of bunkhouse thirteen glared daggers at him. Based on his performance so far, he knew their bunkhouse would be one of the three running farther after the first round of tests. As he looked around the table, Ivan was the only person who he found smiling. Theodor thought this was odd, given everyone else's reaction. Ivan was quickly growing to be their squad's most promising leader. Besides his skill with blades and well-rounded knowledge of battle tactics, he was always the first person up and took it upon himself to stir awake anyone who'd missed the first round of wakeup calls.

Where Theodor fell behind in the morning runs, Ivan excelled. After completion, he would turn back and help those who struggled, like Theodor, coaching them through the remaining distance. Several times during that first week, Theodor had to stop mid-run, bending at the waist and struggling hard to catch his breath. Each time Theodor thought he was going to give up, Ivan would come trotting along. He'd encourage Theodor to keep his feet moving and stay by his side through to the end, even if it meant he would be penalized for it.

Ivan displayed other traits that set him apart from the others as a natural leader. He had a better knowledge of battle strategy than anyone else in the squad. When sparring, Ivan would beat anyone who challenged him in one-on-one combat and took charge directing others during the group's drills. He was so advanced that even the training officers would let him instruct lessons during the first week; it was clear to bunkhouse thirteen that Ivan would be their leader.

After the bunkhouse's reaction to having Theodor in their squad, Ivan saw him leave the dining hall alone before their mealtime had ended.

Excusing himself from the other members of his new squad, he ran after Theodor.

“You’re getting faster at finishing your meals,” he said, catching Theodor before he’d made it very far.

Theodor paused mid-stride, then continued, “No. Not really, I’m just too tired to finish eating. I need to sleep if I’m going to make it through tomorrow.”

“It’ll get better; you just need more practice. Today you improved your morning run time,” Ivan said, trying to lift Theodor’s spirits. “Heck, you made it in time for the last two minutes of breakfast.”

“I really wish they gave us more time to eat in the mornings. Then maybe I’d have enough energy to run faster and train harder.”

“We’ll have to finish in the top three squads during the end of the week’s test for that to happen.”

“I suppose,” Theodor responded half-heartedly.

“If you want, I can help you with the training?” Ivan asked in a friendly tone.

Theodor halted outside the bunkhouse door. Placing his hand on the worn door knob, he pulled it open saying, “What’s the point? I’m not cut out for this.”

Ivan thrust his palm forward, closing the door forcefully with a bang. “Why don’t you want to try?” he barked, showing his anger for the first time since meeting Theodor.

Theodor stepped back, allowing Ivan to come between him and the door to the bunkhouse. “I don’t want to try, because, this isn’t the life for me. I’m never going to be good at this like you. Face it, I’m just not meant to be anything else but a farmer.”

Ivan grabbed him by the shoulders, attempting to shake some sense into him, “You’re stuck in this part of the world whether you like it or not. The officers here don’t care if you see yourself as only a farmer. They see you as a tool, just another body to send to the front lines, and that’s it. Until you start proving your self-worth to them, they’ll only ever see you as just another body. If you want to make it through this war, you’re going to have to try harder.”

Ivan pointed his index finger toward the dining hall where all the officers still ate their meals inside, “The more valuable you are to them, the better they’ll treat you. They’ll view you as someone to protect, to keep

around, *instead* of just another on the front lines. But if that's what you want, keep it up. If all you want to do is be led to slaughter, just keep on slacking off and falling behind. But if you don't want to be a pawn, and want to live, I can help you." Ivan's head tilted forward with his jaw clenched tightly, waiting for Theodor's response.

It didn't come that night; Theodor said nothing to Ivan as he stepped past him and pulled open the door, walking inside. Ivan slammed the door behind Theodor and stormed angrily back to the dining hall.

The next morning Theodor awoke to the first wake-up call along with the rest of his squad. The sun had not yet risen and the weather had taken a turn for the worse. Rain dribbled steadily, covering their bodies with a wetness that chilled them to the bone as they embarked on their morning run.

Once again, Ivan led the squad and finished early. He turned around to head back and bring up the rear, assuming Theodor wasn't able to keep up with the others. As he ran back, however, he was surprised to see Theodor's determined scowl near the rear end of the main pack, farther ahead than the other stragglers. Ivan smiled slightly at him as he passed, but Theodor gave him a determined glance and forced his eyes to remain on the young men and women in front of him, increasing his speed as he ran past Ivan.

After a very quick cold-water bath, Ivan was pleased to find Theodor enjoying his breakfast along with the others from their squad. It was the first time he'd been able to eat breakfast for the full five minutes since he'd arrived. Ivan didn't sit next to him, but watched as he happily devoured eggs, sausage, freshly baked bread, and a small mountain of fruit.

During the morning lectures, Ivan noticed Theodor seemed to be more engaged with the content. Through the afternoon sparring sessions, Theodor put up a decent fight. Still, he was beaten in nearly every match, but Ivan could tell he was trying much harder.

That night at the dinner table was the first time Ivan saw the other members of the squad openly invite Theodor to eat with them. After dinner was over, Ivan pulled Theodor aside and asked, "So, you decided you're not going to be a pawn?"

Theodor nodded, "I didn't want to admit it, but you were right. If I'm going to make it through this war, I need to apply myself."

"That's what I like to hear," Ivan said, smiling. "So, can I help you with your training?"

Theodor chuckled, “Yes, I need it badly.”

“Okay, we’ll start tomorrow. You can spar with me in the afternoon.”



Chapter Four

—

Tests

THROUGHOUT THE SECOND WEEK, Ivan helped Theodor study the lecture material and worked with him during the physical training.

Theodor quickly found he was no longer the worst at everything. By the end of week two, he felt more confident going into the tests than he could've ever imagined.

Test day consisted of a series of competitions comprised of one-on-one combat, squad-on-squad battle strategy, and an obstacle race. During the morning, one-on-one combats began between members of separate squads. The rules were simple: each winner of the sparring match advanced to the next round and the loser would be eliminated from advancing. Each win gained their squad a point. The rounds continued until a victor emerged. By the end of the one-on-ones, the squad's points were added up. The more victories a squad claimed, the more points they received.

Theodor was one of the first of his squad to be called out by a stout young man from bunkhouse eighteen. He saw Theodor as an easy target to pick off early and advance to the next round. Not entirely surprised he'd been picked so quickly, Theodor felt he might have a chance at defeating the lad since he'd been training so vigorously with Ivan.

When the match began, Theodor almost caught the stout lad completely off guard, nearly landing a fatal blow with his blunted practice sword. The lad's reaction time was too quick and he blocked Theodor's blow with his shield. Members of the camp looked on in awe as Theodor swung wildly at his opponent. His fellow squad mates were cheering loudly for him and the noise attracted the attention of other trainees waiting for their rounds to begin. Soon, a crowd had gathered to watch the bout. Theodor's form and skill were lacking, but he made up for it in determination and scrappiness.

After nearly fifteen minutes of sparring, Theodor was too tired to block the calculated attacks of his rival and lost his footing, exposing his chest to a match-winning blow by his opponent. Despite the fact that he'd lost the match, his fellow squad members made him feel as though he'd won. They all congratulated him for putting up such a tough fight.

"He's probably one of the better swordsmen at this camp," Ivan said with a smile. He bobbed his head in the stout lad's direction, "Look at how

tired he is.”

Theodor could see his opponent was hunched over, hands on his knees, gasping for air. His bunkmates were shouting at him and he realized the shouts weren't of praise for his win, but they were, in fact, heckling him for almost being beaten by Theodor. Looking back to Ivan, Theodor smiled and said, “That was actually pretty fun.”

“Good,” Ivan said. “I bet you’ve tired him out so badly that someone else will knock him out of the running soon.”

Ivan was right. Very soon after the next couple of sparring matches, a young man from their squad defeated him in the first two minutes.

At the end of the one-on-one matches, Ivan was the only one from their squad who made it very far, getting it to the final six. He was so tired from having to fight through so many people that he finally suffered defeat. Despite Ivan's success, many of the others in their squad didn't fare well and they were quite low in the rankings. After the bouts, he used Theodor's body to lean on as they made their way across the camp to the testing's next location.

During the squad-on-squad battle strategy, bunkhouse thirteen was met with more defeat. Their squad wasn't doing as well as Ivan or Theodor would've hoped. To their surprise, however, Theodor was turning out to be one of the most valuable members of their squad. By the time they started the obstacle course, they were completely exhausted and fell behind, leaving their squad leaderless. Bunkhouse thirteen's teamwork fell apart and they barely managed to finish the course at all.

At the end of the day the judging officers posted their rankings. Despite all their effort, they still landed among the bottom three. This meant they'd have to wake up earlier, run farther, and quite possibly have shortened meal times because of it. Theodor and Ivan went to their beds that night, not disappointed in their individual performances, but encouraged to help themselves and the others in their squad improve before the next round of tests.

The following two weeks proved more physically demanding than the first. Now that Theodor had a reason to push harder, he didn't think of it as a miserable waste of energy. Each run made him faster, and each sparring match made him stronger. Theodor and Ivan's drive to improve their squad had its desired effects on the others. Nearly half the bunkhouse was beginning to show improvement.

Because they had to run farther, several members of the squad didn't make it back until breakfast was already over. Ivan and Theodor would finish their run and head back to coach the others through. Theodor hoped it would push them to try harder, because those individuals who slacked in the runs would see that Ivan and Theodor had to face the same lack of breakfast in addition to a host of extra exercises for their tardiness. As a result, their lunch was also cut short. The only meal that they could enjoy without interruption was their dinner.

By the end of the fourth week, their squad had shown notable improvements in their overall performance. During the second tests, practically half of their squad made it more than midway through the sparring challenges. Ivan and Theodor advanced into the later rounds, and Ivan once again made it to the final six before being eliminated.

During the squad-on-squad battles, they triumphed over many of the other squads and were placed in the top ten out of all thirty bunkhouses. The obstacle course didn't prove to be nearly as difficult for their squad as it had during the first round of tests. This time, Ivan and Theodor didn't have to spend as much time coaching the others through it; they'd been practicing and were showing improvement. Theirs completed in the top five squads overall. Theodor was relieved that bunkhouse thirteen would be returning to the usual six-mile morning run. Once again they would be able to enjoy their breakfasts.

Over the past several weeks, many of the training officers had taken notice of Theodor's progress. They attested his improvements to Ivan's skills as a natural leader, but Ivan and Theodor knew he was trying harder because he wanted to, not because he was told to.

The remaining two weeks of training were by far the easiest of them all. With some extra energy, Theodor found he had some room to enjoy himself and took a liking to the artful skill of archery. During the sparring sessions, he often chose to practice archery over the other battle stations. For the first time since he'd been there, he was enjoying full meals each day and felt better than he had in what seemed a very long time.

During these last two weeks of training, the trainees were given the chance to apply for specialty divisions. If they were accepted, they could be placed into one of their choice divisions upon completion of training. Theodor's first choice was the archery division. He'd discovered a passion for it and the archers were often not among the first line of soldiers that

charged into battle. For his second choice he'd opted to apply for the cavalry division. He grew up around horses on the farm and knew he'd have a significant advantage on the battlefield if he were on horseback. For the third application, he requested a position in the king's navy. Lubrecht was on the coast and he'd had a bit of sailing experience, but mostly just wanted to stay out of the first ground troops to be sent into battle.

At the end of the sixth week of training, the final rounds of testing would be conducted. During dinner on the evening before the tests, a training officer stood up and tapped his water mug hard against the table commanding their attention.

Clearing his throat, he said, "There'll be a change in the way the tests are scored. The top three squads will receive two weeks of R and R. That's rest and recovery for those of you dullards who don't know what that means. R and R will start the day after camps ended. The rest of the squads will only receive two days R and R after which you'll be reporting to your assigned placements. That's the whole of that shit pie; it'll taste sweeter to some than others." The officer sat down having completed his announcement.

The news of the two weeks R and R brought a new energy to the trainees and the dining hall became a bustle of loud chatter.

Ivan and Theodor were both eager to place among the top three squads. That night they discussed what each of them would do if they'd been granted two weeks off before being sent to war.

"I'd go fishing and eat to my heart's content," Theodor said dreamily.

"I'd take the opportunity to take my wife on a getaway and spend the two weeks wrapped in each other's arms," Ivan said, enveloping his arms around an imaginary person.

"I didn't know you were married," Theodor said quizzically.

"Yep; got married about a year ago to a beautiful Southland girl."

"What's her name?" Theodor asked.

Ivan raised an eyebrow and said as if reciting lines of a poem, "Her name is the key to my heart. She is the goddess of my life and the ray of sunshine during this dark time."

"Okay," Theodor cut him off. "That's not a name. You could've just said you didn't want to tell me."

"I won't tell you her name, but I'll tell you she is the single most important thing in my life."

“That’s good to hear. I wish I could say the same for my sister’s husband.”

“Why?” Ivan asked curiously.

“She eloped with some boy she’d been hiding from my family. She always spoke kindly of him, but my father said he didn’t think he’d treat her nice. I guess he was a noble, or lord, or something. You know how they are, buy her all sorts of fancy things, but would probably never give her his full attention or respect. My father said he didn’t give her his permission to marry the strange young man, so she disobeyed him and ran off anyway. That’s partly why he wouldn’t let me get out of coming here, so I could restore some honor to our family name.”

“How, selfish of her,” Ivan said slowly.

“Oh, I don’t blame her. I would’ve probably done the same thing if I were in her shoes. I bet she’s pretty well off right now.”

“That’s a nice thought.”

“Yeah. Oh well, she’s gone and I’m here,” he said bringing their conversation back to reality.

“I hope we win the two weeks R and R anyway.”

“Me too,” Theodor replied.



THE NEXT MORNING, IVAN and Theodor ate breakfast alongside their squad. They went over scenarios of what could happen during the day’s events. Once at the testing grounds, the group of bunkmates stood gathered around Ivan and Theodor as they finalized their strategies.

Over the next several hours, squad thirteen battled through the rounds of one-on-one matches. Theodor and Ivan, along with several others from their group, made it to the later rounds. After winning their bouts, both Theodor and Ivan made it to the semifinals.

In the semifinals, Theodor fought against the same stout lad from bunkhouse eighteen who’d challenged him during the first round of tests. Their fight this time wasn’t as long. Theodor had learned how to use his sword effectively and defeated the young man after a well-fought, five-minute match. Breathing heavily, Theodor realized he’d made it to the championship round. He wasn’t surprised to know the challenger he’d be facing was his squad leader, and good friend, Ivan.

They gripped the hilts of their blades tightly as they paced clockwise around one another. Ivan was the first to strike. Theodor blocked it. They engaged in several attacking sequences of parries and blocks, their two blades moving just as fast as the other. After nearly ten minutes of evenly matched swordsmanship, Ivan took their fighting to the next level. He advanced so quickly with a series of slashes and stabs that Theodor couldn't react fast enough. Ivan struck him several times in the chest. Theodor stammered, stumbling back on the flat of his heels. When he found his footing again, he realized Ivan had won.

Theodor's muscles were fatigued slightly from their bout, but his spirits remained high. He wasn't discouraged by the loss. After all, it was only a few weeks ago that he'd been one of the worst swordsmen in the camp. Now, he was second best, next to the heroic Ivan, who even the training officers admired.

Moving into the squad-on-squad battles, Ivan and Theodor led theirs to victory. They defeated all thirty of the squads, outsmarting them with their strategies. Theodor and Ivan were already daydreaming about the two weeks of rest and recovery by the time they started the obstacle course. Suffering only a few mistakes during the obstacles, they managed to finish in third place, allowing two other squads to pass them due to their minor slip-ups.

At the end of the day, the judges announced the squad's rankings. Ivan and Theodor cheered louder than anyone else when they heard their squad's name called as first among the top three in the camp. Theodor could hardly believe his ears. He would have two whole weeks to do whatever he wanted before reporting for duty.

Before they went to sleep in their bunks for the last night of camp, the officers posted a list of each squad and what divisions their members were assigned to. Theodor checked the list, fingering his way down through the names. Coming to rest on his name, he followed the line over where it stated the division he'd be reporting to. 'Cavalry', he read as the word sunk into his mind, bearing more weight than he'd previously thought.

He nodded, coming to terms with his assignment and thinking, *that's better than the infantry*. He'd be on horseback, a major advantage on the battlefield.

Next, he ran his finger along the smooth parchment, stopping on Ivan's name, 'Special Forces and Leadership.' Theodor wasn't surprised about the

leadership part of Ivan's assignment, but he didn't know there was a Special Forces division.

Later that night, Theodor found Ivan and asked him, "So, I didn't know the king's army had Special Forces?"

"Yeah me neither," Ivan replied.

"I thought you had to apply to be assigned to a division?"

"I did apply to the Leadership division and the Cavalry, but not the Special Forces."

"Strange. So they selected it for you?"

"I guess so," Ivan answered with a shrug.

"Well best of luck to you," Theodor stuck out his hand and shook Ivan's.

"You too, buddy," Ivan said.

"We'll have to say a proper goodbye before we leave in the morning," Theodor said.

Ivan agreed and they climbed into their beds for their last night as squad members of bunkhouse thirteen.

The next day, Theodor received his papers, showing he'd graduated the training camp and was to report to the Cavalry division headquarters in two weeks from that very day. The officer who'd handed him his papers told him he'd be reporting in Kingston and where the Cavalry's headquarters were located. Theodor nodded and accepted his papers, then searched the crowd for Ivan. He wanted to say goodbye one last time.

Theodor found him in short order and gave him a proper hug and farewell. Ivan hustled off, toward a horse-drawn carriage waiting for him outside the camp's gates. Theodor watched as his friend ran to greet his wife, who'd been standing near the horse. He kissed her and held her in a loving embrace before he stepped into the carriage.

As his wife waited for him to get situated inside, she pulled off the hood of her traveler's cloak, revealing her face for the first time. Theodor thought there was something familiar about her, but couldn't see her clearly. She turned to face camp, catching a last glimpse of the walled barrier that had held her husband for six weeks, before climbing into the carriage. Theodor focused, catching sight of her face in the morning light, and for a moment he thought he recognized her as his sister. His heart skipped a beat and he opened his mouth to call after her, but it was too late. She'd been whisked away by the horse-drawn carriage with Ivan by her side.

Theodor dismissed what he saw as merely his lonely mind playing tricks on him. He'd been wanting to see his sister for over a year, and chalked the instance up to hopeful confusion on his part.

Ivan would have told me if he was married to my sister. Especially after the story I told him about her running away with the strange young man, Theodor thought. *Although he did never mention her name or how they met,* he grew more curious. Finally throwing the idea to the wind, Theodor set out on the trail.

He'd been given new clothes, six weeks of wages, and a new army-issued travel pack; he was going fishing.



Chapter Five

The Quiet Before the Storm

THEODOR PLANNED TO SPEND his two-week reprieve from duty traveling along the Kingston Road. Before the hard-packed gravel road's existence, the Kingston Road was comprised of many timeworn trails connecting all of Southland's coastal towns. In an effort to improve trade and commerce, the late King Kaufen's father, King Bartholomew, commissioned workers from all across the large island to develop the existing network of trails into a respectable road. Much of the road had been built wide enough for carriages to ride three abreast.

Theodor had only ever seen small portions of the Kingston road, one of which had been the section between Lubrecht and the military training camp. He set out to explore the nation of Southland heading west, bypassing the congested city of Kingston. He'd figured there would be plenty enough time to see the exploits of what Kingston had to offer, since he would be reporting there at the end of his two weeks off. Traveling along the road proved to be easier than he'd expected.

He hitched rides with anyone who would have him and was heading westward from Kingston. For the most part, those he met on the road were very happy to accept his companionship. Whenever the sun began to sink low in the sky, Theodor would find a small iconic Southland town, whichever one was next on his way counterclockwise around the island, and leave his traveling party for a stay at the local inn.

Small towns in Southland were plenty enough, spaced out about every ten miles or so. Anyone traveling the Kingston Road could expect an inn nestled neatly along the town's edge. With each inn, Theodor would belly up at the pub on the first floor, get himself a hot meal, and enjoy several pints of brew. While he worked through his meal, he'd eavesdrop on whatever gossip the townsfolk were chattering about before he hustled off to bed.

Once Theodor had bypassed Kingston successfully, he tasked himself with purchasing a decent fishing pole. A willow switch rod was easy enough to make, but lacked a certain delicacy and precision that an actual fishing pole served. That evening, while he was enjoying a freshly poured mug of brew, he overheard some townsfolk talking about a Lumbapi market

being held in the town's square the following day. Theodor recalled learning about the native Lumbapi people in Lubrecht school's history class. They'd once thrived among Southland before its colonization by Westlanders. After many land disputes, the Lumbapi ended up being forced to move to the two southern corners of the island known as the Drake's Head and the Ram's Horn. Their culture intrigued Theodor, and when he'd shown interest in learning more about the ways of the Lumbapi, his father scolded him for it, saying, "Those are the ways of the savage. You're civilized and you'll act like it. Got it?" Though he'd been forbidden from it at home, Theodor read books that his teacher had given him to learn of the native Southland people. He knew he was close to the Rams Horn and would encounter some Lumbapi villages soon; the chance to see their market first-hand was something he couldn't pass up. He went to bed that night eager to find the market in the morning.

Theodor arrived in the town square early the following morning and the market was already brimming with customers. The humming chatter of haggling sellers and bartering buyers filled the silence that had previously consumed the streets. Despite the crowded area, he quickly found a vendor selling the tools he required.

Theodor carefully eyed a set of long flexible poles with the intensity of a predator selecting its prey. He knew exactly what kind of quality he desired and didn't need to be tricked into buying something that he didn't like, so he ignored the salesman babbling in accented Landish, clearly not his first language. Plucking a choice pole from the bunch, he bent it, testing the flex and searching for any imperfections in the material. He rolled the light rod with his fingers and let his right hand drift down to the corked grip at the base.

Holding it gently, he flicked the rod back and forth with his wrist, as if casting. "What kind of wood is this?"

"You've a good eye sir. That there is made from the Pelagic Yew. Only grows along the northern coasts of Westland, you know," the Lumbapi salesman replied.

"How much?"

"Forty copper pieces."

Theodor's face rose high on his brow, "If you want forty copper pieces for this, then I'd better be getting more than this rod." He knew rods of such

quality were expensive and was willing to spend good money on one, but for forty copper pieces he wanted more than just a rod.

“Oh, well of course. Take a look; anything else take your fancy?” The salesman was quick to reply and made a broad stroke of his arm, directing Theodor’s attention to several trays of handmade flies resting above a large box of reels.

Theodor took several steps closer and dug through the box, searching for a reel to match the quality of the rod. Plucking one out the box that caught his eye, Theodor held the reel in one hand and spun it. Feeling a slight drag in the rotation, his gaze momentarily dropped to the others. The quick examination of the remaining reels’ quality confirmed his choice. Holding a reel in one hand, he said, “I’ll take this one.”

The man nodded in reply.

Before leaving, Theodor picked out several flies he recognized, thinking they would make good decoys for luring in a trout. Adding them to his loot, he set the rod, reel, and a handful of flies down on a transaction table in front of the salesman. Pulling out his coin purse, Theodor fingered through six weeks’ worth of pay given to him by the king’s army. As he sifted through the gold and silver pieces, he realized that he didn’t have any copper.

Quickly calculating the conversion rate of copper to silver—fifty coppers to one silver—he withdrew a single silver piece from his pouch and handed it to the salesman. The veteran Lumbapi salesman brought the silver coin to his mouth and bit down on it, testing its authenticity. Holding it up to the morning sun, he turned it over several times, admiring its value as true silver. He nodded with approval and reached into his pocket. Pulling out ten copper pieces, he placed them one at a time in Theodor’s hand, counting them off in Lumbapi as he did so. Theodor closed his hand around the coins and slid them into his pouch, each clinking as they settled into the leather bag. Theodor placed the items into his travel pack and left the market, eager to test his new equipment. The price of the rod had been more than he’d expected to pay, but seeing as how he only had less than two weeks to use it before he left for the war, he didn’t think much of placing a few extra coins.

With his new fishing equipment secured, Theodor continued his adventure around the island. He made his way happily, hitching rides between small towns as he followed the road counterclockwise around the

large island of Southland. Stopping to fish at whatever stream or river he came across, Theodor became more experienced as an angler. If the fishing proved to be good, he'd stay for hours and end up sleeping along the banks under the shining stars. Often, if the fish weren't in the mood to be caught, he found the rhythmic tempo of casting relaxing and it helped him to clear his mind from all the stress he'd be forced to face at the end of his vacation.

Some of the towns' evening activities were more appealing to him than others. Being a young single man, he enjoyed going to pubs and inns to chat with other people his own age. It seemed that the larger the town was, the more establishments there were, therefore, more young people mingling. Theodor didn't fancy himself as a ladies' man, but during his travels around Southland he met many young women his age, and a handful of them led to short-lived romances.

Theodor found himself spending nearly a week in the Lumbapi corners. He rediscovered his fascination with their native cultural influences. To him, they were the liveliest, most accepting people he'd ever met. Of course it didn't hurt that they had the most beautiful women he'd ever seen in his life. If it weren't for his determination to see the remainder of the nation, Theodor would have spent much more time immersing himself in the ways of the Lumbapi.

As Theodor neared the end of Kingston Road's loop, he spent his final day fishing outside the city gates, letting all cares be cast away as he sent out his line into the rippling streams. That night he made his way into the city and found a small dormitory-style inn to spend his last night of vacation. He shared an evening meal with the owners of the establishment and inquired about the cavalry headquarters. They showed Theodor the location in relation to their inn, and he thanked them for their kindness before returning to his room.

The next morning, Theodor awoke early and found his way through the busy streets of the capital. Despite the early hour, the streets were already humming with pedestrians and the clatter of hooves as the sounds reverberated high up the city's towering buildings. Following his inn keep's directions, he arrived at the walled entrance to the cavalry's headquarters.

Pulling the folded parchment from his breast pocket, Theodor presented his papers to the two armed guards at the gate. The guard on his left took his papers. He only needed half a glance at the king's army's seal before

granting him entrance. The guard pointed to two wooden doors at the base of the large stone building behind him.

“Report through those doors,” the guard said in a low scratchy voice.

Theodor nodded as he took back his papers and walked across the small courtyard, slightly dreading his new assignment. He craned his neck as he neared the base of the building. The top floor of the cavalry headquarters stood at least five times taller than any other building within sight.

I wonder what they do behind those walls? He thought.

His gaze returned to the doors and he noticed an engraving of a soldier riding tall atop a stallion sprawled proudly across the entrance. Reaching out with his hand, Theodor opened one of the doors and stepped into the building. Stained-glass windows rose high, flooding the inside lobby with an array of yellow, red, green, and blue light. A single large desk sat in the center of the room. He saw a short woman with fiery red hair standing behind the long rectangular marble desktop. Raising her head, she peered past the tops of her narrow, wire-framed spectacles which sat snugly midway down her slender nose. She watched him intently as he approached.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a tone that made it seem as if he were interrupting something important that she’d been doing.

Theodor made himself more presentable by pulling back his shoulders and clearing his throat. Placing the papers gently on the marble desktop, he said, “Reporting for assignment.” He watched her green eyes move skeptically off his face and down to the signed parchment he placed before her.

Looking through the narrow frames of her spectacles, she read his papers in silence. “Well you came to the right place,” she said, handing the papers back and relaxing slightly. “Up the stairs and to the right,” she pointed to a stone staircase in the back corner of the empty room. “Climb three stories and take the third-level entrance door. General Tomlinson’s office will be the fourth door to the right. Are you with me so far?” she asked, raising a solitary eyebrow at him.

Theodor nodded.

“He’s in command of your division.”

“The Cavalry division?” Theodor asked.

She chuckled as if he made a joke, “No, he does command a division within the cavalry. The reconnaissance and surveillance division. Not the entire cavalry, though.”

Theodor smiled awkwardly and nodded. He thanked her before starting up the stairs. After climbing three stories, he walked through the door to the third floor and stopped outside the general's door. The embossed plaque on the door read:

General Tomlinson of the King's Cavalry, Commander of Recon and Surveillance Division.

Theodor took a deep breath before knocking, and entered.



Chapter Six

Ivan

I VAN WRAPPED HIS ARMS tightly around Hannah as the carriage whisked them away from the training camp. Lost to their surroundings, and having been apart for six long weeks, Ivan and Hannah only had eyes for each other. Originally, Ivan and Hannah had planned on two short days of hiatus before Hannah would need to take Ivan to his reporting station. When Ivan learned about the possibility of having two weeks R and R, he sent Hannah a message explaining how if he won they could vacation to the Kewian Islands. Hannah had been staying in Kingston while Ivan was away, and after receiving his news she chartered a ship to take them to the Kewian Islands. The excitement of their spontaneous trip lifted them to a new high they'd not thought possible, as it was likely that the war would separate them for months at a time. She arranged for the private vessel to leave as soon as they arrived at Kingston's port.

The small chain of tropical islands off the western coast of Southland was widely known for having a worry-free lifestyle. The Islands had been one of the few places in Southland to remain virtually unaffected by the war that was taking place in Kartania. It was the perfect place to take their hiatus from reality.

The carriage slowed as they approached the gated entrance to Kingston's port late that afternoon. Hannah gazed out the window of the carriage door and pointed to the ship she'd arranged. Smiling, they came to a halt, eager to gain entrance beyond the gates of the city and begin their adventure.

During this time of war, and since the recent reclamation of the castle, the recent ruling in Kingston required that all who wished to gain entrance to the city show their documentation. Ivan stepped out from the comfort of their carriage with both their documentation and his signed parchment stating his approved leave of absence. One of the guards standing sentinel at the gate approached the pair and Ivan handed over his papers with a cocky smile sprawled across his face. The armored man snatched them and examined them in great detail. Ivan cleared his throat and held out an expectant hand, anticipating that the man would have returned the papers much more quickly. The guard ignored Ivan's gesture and waved for one of

his partners to view the documents with him. A terrible sense of dread washed over him as the two guards looked down their noses and nodded simultaneously; he knew something wasn't right.

With the parchment in hand, the guard reached a hefty iron-plated arm toward him and said, "Sir. You'll need to come with us. Ma'am, could you step out of the carriage and come with us?"

Ivan remained still, shocked at their reaction, while Hannah emerged from the carriage. "No," Ivan said forcefully. "There must be some kind of mistake. Those are legitimate papers. I received them just this morning and I'm taking my wife on a two-week vacation to the Kewian Islands."

"Sir," the guard said sternly. "The legitimacy of your document is not in question. This is a matter of urgency in regard to your assignment."

"What do you mean?" Ivan asked, a sudden sense of confusion saturating his mind.

"I was told, just this morning, to send anyone with your assignment directly to the marshal," the guard told him.

Ivan let out a thick exhale, heavy with dismay, "My wife is coming with me."

"Of course, sir," the guard said, waving them forward and opening the gates.

Ivan and Hannah followed the guard as he led them away from the marina and deeper into the city. The king's army held its headquarters in buildings throughout the city, but where the guard took them was no military building; it was the royal castle where the regent of Kingston ruled in the late king's stead.

Ivan gave Hannah a worried expression as they followed the guards up to the base of the castle. The castle walls were a reminder of the wrath of their enemy. The outer walls were missing large portions of its defense from where the sorcerer's dragon plowed through them.

"This isn't the army's building," Ivan stated as the armored guard led them inside the castle's walls.

"The Lord Briggan, regent elect of Kingston, who came into power after the passing of our beloved King Kaufen and the disappearance of his son, Prince William, appointed a marshal to oversee the military's efforts," the guard explained.

"Lord Briggan doesn't think it suitable for his high commander of the King's Army to be living in squalor at the army's base of operations, so he's

moved him here where they can work side-by-side to defeat our terrible foe, and his dragon.” He led them through a small courtyard and up one of the castle’s turrets, ascending the spiral staircase as they climbed. Stopping outside a thick wooden door hinged in cast iron, the guard said, “Here we are.”

Ivan and Hannah stood impatiently in the dimly lit stairwell as the guard pounded a heavy fist against the door. After a moment of silence, Ivan could hear scuttling feet shuffling up to the inside of the door. With a loud creak, it pulled inward, revealing the marshal who’d taken command of the king’s army. A squat, portly man, the marshal stood in his military uniform of felted crimson and gold. Ivan thought his appearance fit the description of a spoiled nobleman who’d never worked an honest day in his life.

What does he know about commanding an entire army? Ivan thought, eyeing the man skeptically from head to toe.

The marshal smiled bluntly at them. He turned to the guard and raised his brow, as if expecting an explanation of some kind. Realizing his absence of introduction, the guard handed over Ivan’s assignment papers. Holding them at arm’s length to better read them. He expelled a long-winded, “Ah,” as he sighed, still clutching Ivan’s papers. Waving them into his room, he said in a pompous tone, “Come in; come in. Please, sit.” He pointed to two chairs placed in front of his desk.

Ivan didn’t sit down and neither did Hannah. They both looked at the haughty man in earnest as he eyed them coldly in return.

After several long breaths, Ivan was the first to speak, “There must be some kind of mistake here. I was issued a two-week leave of R and R before reporting to my assigned post.”

“Yeah, about that...” the marshal trailed off. Grabbing hold of one of many candelabums atop his desk, the marshal held the lit candles near the base of Ivan’s papers, igniting them around the edges.

“What are you doing!?” Ivan exclaimed, reaching out across the desk and attempting to snatch the papers from the marshal’s hand.

The marshal pulled away, easily staying out of Ivan’s reach. Meeting Ivan’s glare with his cold dark eyes, the marshal said coldly, “Unfortunately, you won’t be taking any time off.”

“Wait just a minute!” Ivan shouted slamming his fist on the desk. “Do you have any idea who I am!?”

The marshal's gaze remained pointedly fixed on Ivan, "Yes, I know exactly who you are, Ivan. It's precisely why you're being sent to train with the elves in the Everlight Kingdom. You are to leave at once."

"What?!" Ivan shouted, infuriated at the marshal.

"Take them away," the marshal waved a limp wrist at them and the guard approached to escort them from his office.

"Take your hands off me!" Ivan shouted when the guard came to lay his grip on Ivan's shoulder.

"Honey," Hannah said, trying to calm him down. She'd seen Ivan's temper before and didn't want him to do anything he'd regret. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and said in a soft voice, "It's okay. We'll go to the elves; peacefully."

"But the Kewians," he whispered through his clenched jaw.

She shook her head, "They'll still be there when this is all over."

Ivan relaxed slightly, "All right, we'll go."

They followed the guard back down the winding stairs and beyond the castle gates. Entering the marina area, the guard ushered them to a ship. His vessel wasn't the one they'd originally intended leaving Kingston from, but Ivan knew they didn't have much choice, unless they wanted to become fugitives of the crown. Ivan and Hannah boarded the ship that would take them across the Marauder's Sea, dropping them off along the elven coast.



FAIR WEATHER AND CALM seas graced their ship as it carried Ivan and Hannah across the Marauder's Sea. The ten days spent on the ship were a bleak reminder of the vacation the two lovers were meant to be sharing. As they came to land on the elven coast at the Glacial Melt Bays, a host of elves awaited their arrival. Ivan recognized two of them as nobles, based on their lavish robes.

"Looks like we're getting a royal welcome," Ivan said to Hannah, pointing at the two elves adorned in silks and sparkling jewelry.

Coming to a stop in the middle of the bay's deep waters, members of the crew readied a shuttle boat to take Ivan and Hannah to shore. They sat stoically as the crewmen rowed them across the calm waters of the bay. Once their skiff crested the shoreline, a host of elves gathered around eager to meet them.

An elf—appearing younger than he undoubtedly was—approached, speaking soothing tones, “Welcome to the Everlight Kingdom. Peace be with you and yours,” he paused as his gaze rose and eyed the forested hills beyond the beach in a spiritual moment of silence. His gaze returned to them after a moment of reflection, “I am Nadir, son of King Asmond.”

“We’re honored to be here,” Ivan said, hoisting himself out of the boat. He lent a hand to his wife as she climbed out of the small shuttlecraft and onto the sandy beach. “I’m Ivan of Southland, and this is my wife, Hannah,” Ivan said as he and Hannah bowed their heads slightly as was the customary greeting of the elves.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. Let me introduce you to the King and Queen.” Escorting them a short distance along the beach, the elf prince brought them before the leaders of the elven race. As Nadir introduced Ivan and Hannah to the king and queen, they bowed again to show their respect.

“We’ve heard great things about you, Ivan,” King Asmond said.

“Really?” Ivan replied, truly surprised.

“Yes. We have requested your presence in a particular project of interest to our people. We’re building an elite task force. Your unique history brought you to my attention and I thought you’d make a strong candidate,” the king spoke elegantly, his bright eyes fixed on Ivan.

The look the elf king was giving him made Ivan uneasy. *Do elves eat humans?* he wondered. Brushing away his worries, he asked, “What kind of task force?”

“The kind no one has ever seen before,” Asmond said, vaguely. “And no, we elves do not eat humans; we are vegetarians.” Before Ivan could question him further, the king waved a hand, motioning for the others to follow him.

Ivan turned to Hannah and said, “How did he know that’s what I was thinking?”

“Ivan,” she scolded slapping him timidly on the arm.

“What? Did you see the way he was looking at me?”

She shook her head chuckling slightly, “You are ridiculous sometimes.”

Nadir grabbed their attention with a wave of his hand, “You will ride on horseback to our capital city; follow me.” Nadir showed them over to the forested tree line where two horses stood, saddled and ready to ride.

“What about you and the others?” Ivan asked, looking around. To his surprise, the group of elves that were once on the beach had disappeared

while he and Hannah were talking.

“We elves don’t need to rely on other animals to travel great distances,” he said, revealing a slight smile. “Just try to keep up.”

Ivan hesitated, questioning Nadir’s confidence in their ability to outpace a horse. He noticed Hannah climbing into the saddle and decided to do as he’d been asked. Adjusting his hips as he readied himself to ride, Ivan held little hope that the elves could hold the steady speed to match that of their horses. Once on horseback, Ivan asked, “Where did all those elves go?”

Nadir stood solitary before them, his calm, patient gaze waiting until they seemed trail-ready before answering. Calmly, the young prince said, “They left before you two were saddled. Are you ready?”

Ivan shrugged, “Sure.” He watched as Nadir angled his body toward the forest, bent his knees slightly, and then rushed away almost too quickly for his eyes to see where he’d gone. Lulling for only a half second, Hannah and Ivan spurred their horses to follow, galloping at full speed in pursuit of the elf. Ivan held his chest low against the horse’s mane as they galloped full speed through the forest. Ivan saw Nadir, running ahead. He spurred his horse faster to catch the elf, yet their horses were still not as fast as Nadir.

They followed the elf prince for hours, their pace never lessening. Ivan began to wonder if their horses would last much longer; he’d never pushed a horse this hard before. Nadir eventually slackened his pace and Ivan and Hannah reigned in on their mounts. Slowing to a trot, they came alongside Nadir, who gazed at a towering wall of vegetation in the near distance. As Ivan and Hannah approached, they could see that the plant barrier had grown together so thickly that it rivaled that of any stonewall Ivan had ever seen. Standing taller than any of the gates in Southland’s capital city, the living wall rose high and held two large living gates coming seamlessly together over the path they rode on. Beyond it, a sea of tree-like buildings stretched upward into the forested canopy above.

“Welcome to Cedarbridge, our kingdom’s chief city,” Nadir said as they came to a halt outside large living gates.



Chapter Seven

—

The Dragon Wars

THE ELF PRINCE LED Hannah and Ivan through the massive gates and into the forested city of Cedarbridge. Nadir led the way down the dirt paths of the city, past countless trees that had been used as houses. Ivan and Hannah looked up in awe at the city among the trees. Where Kingston's buildings were framed from lumber and rose from the ground up, Cedarbridge's buildings were the trees themselves. The forest seemed to form the structures needed for the elves, as buildings and homes rose high into the canopies.

Nadir came to a stop near the edge of a large cliff band that bordered the northern edge of Cedarbridge. He stood motionless as he peered out over the valley below. Matching his gaze, Ivan and Hannah approached the edge of the cliff and looked out at the expansive valley below. In the distance, Ivan saw large winged silhouettes flying against the sky's backdrop. Their wings were shaped unlike any bird he'd ever seen and they seemed to congregate above a stone spire climbing skyward, high above the forested valley.

"What kind of birds are those?" he asked Nadir, pointing to the dark shapes soaring through the sky.

"Those aren't birds," Nadir said seriously. "Those are dragons."

Ivan turned to face his wife, perplexity struck on their faces. "Why do you have dragons so close to your city?" he asked, turning back to Nadir.

"They live here," the prince said easily.

For a moment, Ivan found himself speechless. After several long breaths he asked, "They don't attack?"

"No?" he replied in an alarmed tone. "We elves have an agreement with their kind. In this time of need, they've arranged to help our cause and send us some of their hatchlings."

"What for?" Ivan asked.

"To see if they can be paired with our more skilled soldiers among the five nations," the prince said, surprised that Ivan lacked this knowledge.

Ivan wondered for a moment why Nadir took them straight to the cliffside and was telling them about the dragon hatchlings; then it hit him, "You've brought me here to be paired with a dragon?"

Nadir nodded slowly, "We realize it may take time to find the right match, but that is our goal here."

"How many others are in this program?" he asked.

"We have five instructors, all are elves. They've been bonded with their dragons for decades and have a great wealth of experience. Other recruits, such as yourself, are undergoing training as we speak. Most are elves, two dwarfs, and you are the first human to join us."

"How long can I expect to be here?"

"As long as it takes," the prince answered. "Your wife is more than welcome to live here with you."

Ivan gave Hannah a look as though to ask her opinion. Her eyes wandered back to the tree-style houses of Cedarbridge. Nodding, she said, "I think I could get used to it here."

"Are you sure?" Ivan asked.

She took his hands up with hers and gazed deep into his eyes, "Anywhere we can be together is more than fine with me."

Ivan nodded. "Okay," he turned back to the elf prince, "Which tree is ours?"

"Follow me," he replied with a slight smile.

Nadir led them down a steep, stone staircase carved into the side of the cliff band. Reaching the forested valley floor below, he led Ivan and Hannah further away from the city along a lightly worn path. After nearly an hour, they emerged from the trees into a clearing. Ivan saw for the first time their new home.

A large, stone castle-like building was perched at the far end of the clearing. The elf prince escorted them out across the grassy expanse. They were nearly halfway to the building when a large dragon with bright-red scales flew directly overhead. It banked sharply to the left as it flapped its great wings twice, slowing its momentum before coming to a soft land on the grass ahead. Bowing low to the ground with its neck, Ivan saw there was an elf garbed in boiled-leather armor colored to match the dragon's red scales. Rising from their seated position between the dragon's massive shoulders, the elf leapt down, landing lightly, and approached.

Ivan stood tall, ready to introduce himself to one of his new instructors. He stepped forward in preparation to greet the rider. The leather-clad elf was wearing a well-polished helm, covering most of their face. The broad-

shouldered rider reached up and pulled the helm off, shaking out long, black hair.

Ivan extended his arm to greet the elf, "Pleased to meet you, sir; my name is..." he trailed off once he noticed the tanned face of the feminine rider.

"Ivan," the elf woman said with a slight elven accent. She took hold of his outstretched hand, shaking it firmly.

Ivan nodded, still tongue-tied.

"Asmond informed me that our newest recruit was a human," she said, loosening her grip. She focused her auburn eyes on Nadir and said, "Nadir, How are you? It's been a while since I've seen you. You've grown," she tilted her head to the side and stared curiously at his head. "Your ears are longer too," she added.

Nadir blushed slightly, his pale complexion reddening, "It's nice to see you too, Selleya." He glanced at Ivan and said, "Forgive me for not introducing you. Ivan, this is Selleya, one of your instructors. Selleya, this is Ivan and his wife Hannah."

Selleya shook Hannah's hand in greeting, "It's nice to meet you both."

"Your eyes," Hannah said, marveling at the reddish color to her eyes.

"Yeah, happened when I bonded with this old fella," she pointed a thumb over her shoulder to the large, red dragon behind her.

"They're beautiful," Hannah remarked.

"Thank you," Selleya replied.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Nadir said, taking a step back. "Good luck, Ivan." He turned and was gone before Ivan could respond.

"Come on, I'll show you to your room," Selleya said, leading them toward the stone building.

From the outside, the stone structure stood three stories tall and shaped like many castle towers he'd seen in Kingston. On the ground level, there was a very long single-story hall with an expansive timbered roof.

Upon entering the building, Selleya said, "This is the dining hall. It was custom built to seat dragons as well as elves, humans, and dwarfs. Before we head up to your room, I'll show you our library. It's where you'll be spending many hours from here on out," Selleya said to Ivan.

She led them through a doorway and down a wide set of stone stairs near the back wall of the main floor of the building's entrance. The darkened stairwell led downward, reaching further into the darkness of the

basement beneath the building. Selleya spoke one word and torches lining the walls ignited simultaneously. They continued down the stone stairs and out into a large cave lined with glowing torchlight.

Viewing the high ceilings and wide entrance, Ivan asked, “Was this built to allow dragons in as well?”

“You got it,” she said, tapping the end of her nose.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannah said, admiring the towering bookshelves that covered nearly every surface of the cave walls.

“Everything you’ll ever need to know about magic is written right here in these books,” Selleya said, sparking Ivan’s intrigue even more so than before.

She brought Hannah and Ivan back up to the main level and they followed her up a second staircase which led to the second and third stories. Arriving at the second floor, Selleya led them down a wide hallway lined on either side with wooden doors.

“This is our dormitory,” she said as they walked. “We have many vacant rooms at the moment. These first three on both sides are currently taken. Other than that, you can have your pick. Take your time; I’ll be outside with Norig.” Ivan and Hannah gave her a strange look at the mention of the name. “Oh, sorry; Norig is the name of my dragon. He’s the red one I came in on.” Ivan and Hannah nodded. “Right, well, I’ll be outside when you’re ready.”

Selleya left them while Ivan and Hannah chose a room at the far end of the hallway and began to settle in.

After selecting a room, Ivan and Hannah went back out to the front of the building where Selleya and Norig were waiting for them. Accompanying the instructor were four other riders—all elves—and their dragons. In addition to the other new riders, four younger elves and two dwarfs stood alongside, ready to greet them. After introductions, Ivan learned that the elves with dragons were to be their instructors and the four younger elves and two dwarfs were his fellow students.

They’d already been introduced to Selleya and her dragon Norig, but in addition to her, he learned the names of the other instructors—Freaweny, an elf woman with blonde hair and blue eyes who rode a blue dragon named Liz. Derseiyn, or ‘Ders’ as he preferred, had brown hair and had a similar complexion to Selleya. He rode an emerald dragon named Ratayr, or ‘Rata’ for short. Rova, the second male elf to introduce himself, had silver hair and

green eyes. Rova rode a black dragon named Bramis. Finally, Tygeiros or 'Ty' as he preferred, had black, curled hair, dark brown eyes, and darker skin than Selleya's and Ders' combined. Ty rode Zrydon, a purple dragon. Over the coming months, the five instructors would teach Ivan and the others everything an aspiring rider would need to know.

Ivan's fellow elf students, Poc and Aslorin, were young elf men and were similar in appearance to Nadir. They had sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes that were hard not to stare directly into when talking to them. Viessa and Talia were both young elf women. Viessa resembled Ty with her dark eyes and curly hair, where Talia had light skin and hair. Two more elves joined their group several months later. They were twin elf boys with brown hair and eyes, who went by Karis and Horis. The two dwarf students were both tanned and had long thick brown hair; Bareign was the male and Rumhilda was the female.

Together, the nine of them trained vigorously, day and night, learning how to block their thoughts from their instructors' magical mindreading abilities. Building mental shields was the only thing close enough to magic that they could practice while they waited to form bonds with the hatchling dragons. Once they'd become bonded with a dragon, it would gift them magic. They would need to be taught how to properly control the magical energy flowing among them if the elves' program were to be successful at creating useful riders to combat Merglan and Killdoor.

Almost immediately after a new student's arrival, one of the instructors would take them to the hatchlings. On Ivan's first day, after he'd been introduced, Selleya showed him to the baby dragons. She encouraged him to try playing with the young dragons and see if any of them showed a special interest in him. Even though they were only hatchlings, the dragons were almost as large as a horse, so he didn't want them to become too riled up or he might be trampled. Though the dragons liked him, and he was excited by their presence, none showed him any special interest. As the days passed and the other students began to form bonds with the hatchlings, Ivan grew concerned he might not make a bond with those remaining.

Several months passed without success of bonding. Ivan felt as though he was falling too far behind the others in their training, but Hannah and Selleya helped him keep to his faith that his bond would come in time. Selleya reminded him that he was gaining more experience with building his mental defenses than the others.

“This is fundamental in magical battle. Once you’ve bonded with a hatchling, your ability to control your mind will be stronger than the others’ because you’ve had more time to practice,” she told him.

The bond finally came during a training exercise. He was riding a young dragon named Jazzmaryth and they’d just outflown Rova and Bramis in the pursuit exercise. Even those who’d already become bonded with their dragons couldn’t yet work together well enough to outmaneuver Rova and Bramis. The best anyone else had done was when Viessa and her dragon bested Ty and Zrydon during a chase, but Ty was no match for Rova on Bramis.

Together, Jazzmaryth and Ivan soared over the treetops, edging further away from the training facility. They’d linked their minds and blocked the instructors from sensing their location. Jazzmaryth landed in a small clearing next to a stream. Ivan could only explain his excitement and the thrill he felt through emotion. Jazzmaryth didn’t need to use her mind to reciprocate the feeling with Ivan. Taking a chance, and acting purely on instinct, Ivan held out his palm. Jazzmaryth let him place it on her forehead. In that moment, the energy flowing between them combined. Ivan felt the heat of the electric pulse flood into his veins, filling his body with a surge of newfound strength. The instant their two minds bonded, a blast of energy emitted from them in an explosive wave, shooting outward in every direction and left them harmoniously attached at its epicenter. Ivan could feel Jazzmaryth’s magic pulsing through his body. There was no denying it; they’d formed a bond that would last a lifetime.

Together, they flew back to the training facilities, a pair ready to be trained in magic. They shared a new connection—a bond for life, and everlasting.



DURING THE REMAINING months of his first year training with the elves, Ivan learned how to control the magic flowing within him. He learned to use it to make him faster, stronger, and a more powerful soldier. Out of all the skilled students chosen for the elite program, Ivan was turning out to be the star pupil.

One evening while he lay in bed with his wife Hannah, she gave him surprising news that would make him one of the happiest men in all of Kartania. He was to be a father. Over the next nine months, Ivan worked

harder than ever to become a successful role model that his child could be proud of.

Shortly after the birth of his son, Ivan was called to action. Merglan had changed the focus of his war efforts to conquering Nagano, the land of dragons, and was coaxing young dragons into service with him. While Ivan was away, Hannah and their young child would be cared for by the elves. As Ivan kissed his wife goodbye, he promised he'd return to them safely.

"Why has Merglan changed his focus so suddenly?" Ivan asked his mentor Selleya, as they flew alongside the other riders toward Nagano's border to the east of the Everlight Kingdom.

"The reasons for his sudden change in tactics aren't fully known to us," she began. "All we know is that Ormond and Isabella, the two riders tasked with keeping an eye on Merglan's movements, have announced his change in strategy. They've reported that young dragons are being tricked into serving Merglan. He's convinced them that the human race is evil, aside from himself, and even though they haven't seen humans for themselves, they've decided to join his cause. The younger generation of dragons aren't wise to Merglan's deceptions. They've been ignoring their elders, casting their warnings aside and believing the lies Merglan feeds them. Increasingly, younger dragons are siding with Merglan, and in doing so, tensions between the elders have grown to hostile reactions. Last night, three younger dragons attacked an elder dragon known for speaking out against Merglan and his war. This is the first time in history, that we know of, where dragons have attacked each other without the aid of a bond's influence on them."

"What's our objective?" Ivan asked.

"We're to meet with Ormond and Isabella near the Nagano border. From there we'll create a scouting party to fly out and observe Merglan's gathering. We aren't sure how many dragons he's converted, but we need to know in order to decide what actions are necessary for dealing with the threat," she said.

Ivan and Jazzmaryth flew in silence for the remainder of their flight. Upon their arrival, Ormond and Isabella, the two riders tasked with watching Merglan's movements, introduced themselves.

"Welcome," they said, acknowledging the five instructors they'd clearly known prior to this meeting. "For those of you we haven't met," Ormond

nodded to the nine new riders among them. "I am Ormond, and this is my wife, Isabella." He motioned to her and she stepped forward.

"Good afternoon," Isabella greeted them. "You should've already been briefed on the situation we are dealing with here," she began. "Merglan's aims were largely focused on his conquest of the human nations. As you may know, after his conquest of Southland's capital, he set out to take over Westland and the Rollo Islands.

"We've been aiding in their fight against him, but the enemy is cunning and growing more powerful as time passes. For reasons unclear to us, he's suddenly turned his focus on the Eastland Territories and the northeastern reaches of Kartania. In the last week alone, he's acquired the kurr of Eastland to fight for him. This is the first time in history that anyone's been able to negotiate with them. The kurr forces have attacked Mount Orena and the dwarf kingdom is under siege. Last night Merglan had a ranking elder of the Nagano community attacked by three of his young converted dragons. This has outraged the elder dragons and stirred conversations of a civil war among their race.

"Our job is to see how many dragons Merglan has recruited to his side. We're on an observation mission only. We are not to engage them in battle unless it's absolutely necessary for self-preservation." As she finished, several of the new riders looked to their swords hung at their hips, longing to get a chance to use them.

"Is that understood?" Ormond barked at them.

The two were met with a resounding, "Yes," from the fourteen riders.

"We'll leave at dusk. You have some time to prepare," Ormond said.

During the remaining hours of the day, Ivan and Jazzmaryth went over the spells they'd learned in order to cast a concealment cloak from other sorcerers. Once Ivan was sure they had gotten it right, they worked on fortifying their minds from potential attacks.

When the sun sank low, touching the western horizon, Isabella and Ormond led their flight. The group of dragon riders took to the sky, climbing high over Nagano. The chill of the darkening sky sent shivers down Ivan's back as they glided silently out over the land of dragons. Several hours passed as they flew toward Merglan's dragon encampment.

Ivan looked down. He combined his mind with Jazzmaryth's and, using her keen eyes, they were able to view the dragons below. Prepared for a mental attack, Ivan felt the powerful force of Merglan's mind searching for

them, hunting for a way into one of their minds. Nearly losing his grip on Jazzmaryth, Ivan struggled to keep the sorcerer's mind from entering his. He looked to the other riders and could see from the expressions on their faces that they were also under attack.

Barring the mental attack, Ivan counted the young dragon army's numbers to be in the hundreds; far more than he was anticipating.

Looking to his mentor, Selleya motioned with her hand for them to leave. Ivan and his dragon banked to the left and began to follow Selleya away from the place in the sky where Merglan's mind was trying to break through each one of their mental walls. Feeling the pressure of Merglan's grip relaxing, he looked back to see two riders still circling over Merglan's camp. At a closer glance he saw they were descending, flying closer to the dragon encampment.

"Wait," Ivan shouted and spun his dragon around.

Isabella and Ormond turned to see what was happening. Noticing the two riders spiraling downward, they too directed their dragons back to help.

"Ivan, no!" Selleya shouted, but he and Jazzmaryth were already speeding toward the entranced riders.

Catching up to him quickly, Ormond flew close along his side, "We'll take on Merglan. You focus on getting your fellow students out of there."

Ivan nodded and they dived down toward the descending students, caught in Merglan's mental grip. Ivan could see a dozen young dragons, like Jazzmaryth shooting up toward the sky after them. He focused on blocking his mind from Merglan's influence and reaching the students in time.

It was Aslorin the elf and Bareligh the dwarf. Ivan could tell that Ormond and Isabella were locked in an intense mind battle with Merglan, because he felt the pressure on his own mental walls lessen. He looked to see them twisting and jerking in strange motions as they engaged the powerful sorcerer.

Ivan dived faster, taking the opportunity to catch Aslorin and Bareligh. They too seemed to come out of the trance they'd been held in, and upon seeing how low to the ground they were, became frightened. The dozen dragons that had taken flight after them were almost upon them. Ivan had no choice. If he were going to help them escape, we would have to use magic.

The first two dragons streaked toward his fellow students. Ivan released a burst of energy toward them, deflecting their trajectory around Aslorin and Bareign. The two dragons they rode were frantically trying to escape as Ivan flew past them, continuing on downward toward the enemy dragons. Drawing his sword from its sheath, he placed his palm on the blade and spoke the words that would make the blade's energy extend outward toward the dragons. He sliced through the air with the blade. A bright streak of energy extended from the tip and mimicked the blade's motion, cutting through five of the young dragons before the others dodged out of its deadly hue.

Opening her wings and pulling up, Jazzmaryth looped back and joined the other two students and their dragons in their escape. Ormond and Isabella remained locked in a mental struggle with Merglan. The seven remaining dragons chased down the three fleeing students. As they caught them, the dragons engaged in dragon-on-dragon aerial combat. Jazzmaryth clawed and bit ferociously against two dragons while Ivan leapt off her back, landing on a third attacker. Slicing with the sharpened edges of his sword, he quickly removed the dragon's head and leapt off its neck, managing to grab hold of the tail of one of the dragons that was attacking Jazzmaryth.

The dragon attempted to flick him off its tail, but Ivan held on tightly. Unable to remove the latched human, the dragon removed itself from Jazzmaryth, allowing her to defeat the other attacking dragon with a powerful blow, while Ivan faced an irritated dragon with a human clinging to its tail. The dragon swatted at Ivan who slashed and stabbed at the dragon's claws with every pass. As the dragon released a primal roar, Ivan could sense the fire building within its chest.

It's going to roast me.

With a final act of desperation before the dragon expelled its flames down on him, he reached above his head and cut the tip of the dragon's tail off. As he fell through the air, Ivan felt the flames of the dragon's breath pushing down on his leather breastplate. His act of desperation had worked; the dragon's flames licked against his body, but did not engulf him.

Jazzmaryth descended upon the dragon as it released its fire. She dug her hind legs' claws deep into the skull of the dragon, extinguishing its light and continued on past it as it fell lifeless through the sky. Tucking up under Ivan as he tumbled downward, Jazzmaryth scooped Ivan up as he came to

land on her back. Ivan situated himself and she looped back up toward the other dragons.

Aslorin and Bareign each battled two dragons simultaneously. Bareign had managed to cleave one to death with his battle-axe, while Aslorin defended himself from the two dragons. Ivan and Jazzmaryth helped dispatch the remaining foes, and together the three students returned to a safe distance along with the other fleeing riders.

Ormond and Isabella eventually broke the grip of Merglan's mind and escaped, but not before Merglan was able to read into their thoughts. Later that night, Ivan overheard Ormond saying that their children were no longer safe from his reach.

Back at the eastern border of the Everlight Kingdom, Selleya scolded Ivan for his reckless behavior. "What were you thinking? You could've been killed!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry, but Aslorin and Bareign were going to be captured or killed if we did nothing," Ivan protested.

"Ormond and Isabella were more than capable of retrieving them," she said. "Do you understand that the young dragon army sees this as an attack on their forces and will likely engage in civil war against their own kind."

"Did you see how many dragons Merglan had recruited? There were hundreds of them!" Ivan shouted. "They had their minds made up that the war had already started. They tried to kill an elder before we even arrived here!"

"It was strictly an observation mission only!" she reprimanded.

"Merglan was going to kill them," Ivan said.

"We were trying to prevent this war from happening, not start it," Selleya said, dejectedly. She left him before he could say another word.

Later that night, Aslorin and Bareign approached Ivan and thanked him for saving their lives. They told him Merglan tried to extract information from their minds. They'd been able to protect their secrets from him, but had lost control of their bodies while he slowly brought them in. Luckily Ormond and Isabella were able to distract Merglan long enough for them to escape.

Over the next several months, Merglan led the attack of the young dragon army against the elder dragons. The fighting was grueling and many of the riders fell during the struggle. The only student riders to survive the Dragon Wars were Ivan, Talia, and Bareign. Ty, Freaweny, and Ders also

fell in battle, slain by Merglan himself. With the help of Ormond, Isabella, Selleya, and the three students, they drove back the young dragon army, eventually forcing Merglan to flee from Nagano.

During his last encounter with Merglan before he fled, the sorcerer learned of Ivan's newly born child and threatened to kill the baby before the war was over. After driving him from Nagano, however, Ivan viewed the threat as a desperate act of intimidation by a defeated leader and not as a viable hazard.

Returning home to his wife and four-month-old child, Ivan continued his studies of magic and training with Selleya and Rova. After Merglan vacated Nagano, the younger dragons' minds, purged of his poisonous influences, realized how insignificant their reasons were to create such a long and bloody war among their race. They settled their differences with the elders peacefully and reformed their alliance with the elves in attempts to rid Kartania of Merglan. Many, however, wouldn't seek the powerful sorcerer out in battle, because they feared how easily he'd been able to manipulate their minds. Eventually, the dragons largely gave up the fight and viewed themselves as detached from the strifes of humans, elves, and dwarves.

Ivan learned Merglan's influence even reached the elves, and several of them attempted to assassinate the remaining riders. In one instance they were successful. An elf spy convinced Bareign that his people needed help driving back the kurr army along the Eastland Mountains. Bareign didn't know that the dwarfs had already driven the kurr army back successfully. Bareign and his dragon flew out to meet his fellow dwarves for battle. Upon seeing his people were safe he began to return to the elf kingdom. Merglan placed airmines on his path. Flying into one, the mine's explosion knocked him from his dragon. Merglan killed the wounded dwarf rider and his young dragon before he ever reached the elven border.

Word of Bareign's death shocked Ivan and the remaining riders. Their numbers were dwindling and Merglan's strength seemed to be growing with each rider's death. It was in this hour of darkness that Merglan's forces attacked the elven borders for the first time. King Asmond sent his army along with the remaining riders to defend his kingdom.

Merglan's orc and kurr armies attacked with great force, but the elves were able to hold them at bay. Merglan had busied himself with hunting down Ormond and his family while the army of orcs and kurrs distracted

the other riders. One evening while Ivan and the others were considering calling on the aid of the human armies to defend the Everlight Kingdom, they learned the horrible news. Ormond had been slain. Merglan hunted Ormond's family down and trapped his wife in a deadly engagement. Ormond saved his wife by sacrificing himself to distract Merglan long enough for her to escape with their two little girls. Upon hearing this news, Rova and Selleya left to meet Isabella in secret. They ordered Ivan to stay behind and take command of the elf army.

Ivan called on the aid of his fellow human armies. Just before their arrival, he learned from Selleya that Isabella had died from the wounds she obtained battling Merglan. One of their daughters had gone missing, but the other was safe back in Cedarbridge.

Ivan cursed Merglan for his evil ways and prepared for battle with Merglan's forces. They'd driven the orc and kurr army all across the borders of the Everlight Kingdom. He'd decided the best place for them to meet the humans would be near the Glacial Melt Bays. Ivan knew Merglan's navy couldn't match the force of their human counterparts, the Rollo Islander's Navy. He knew they could hold the orc and kurr, with the help of the humans, at the bays.

With the help of King Asmond and the three other remaining riders, Ivan led the elven forces to join with the humans near the Glacial Melt Bays.



Chapter Eight

Reunion

THEODOR STOOPED HIS HEAD as he rode on horseback through the drizzling rain. He'd received orders to lead his cavalry troop from the Bareback Plains to the border of the Everlight Kingdom and rendezvous with the elven army near the Glacial Melt Bays. Since he'd become a member of the cavalry, Theodor had risen through the ranks of his troop, earning lead commander. After reporting in Kingston at the cavalry's headquarters, he'd been assigned to a reconnaissance-based division. The four hundred men that composed the division were tasked with carrying out special missions separate from the bulk of the King's Armed Forces. Often the division was divided into smaller troops, carrying out separate missions and tracking Merglan's forces throughout the human nations of Kartania. His troop had spent the last several months hunting and killing orc and kurr that still held factions among the vastness of the Bareback Plains.

Since he reported for duty in Kingston, Theodor had spent the last two years stationed in the nation of Westland. The closest he'd been to the elven border was a battle that took place just east of the Sharpstone Mountains, still two or three days' ride to the Everlight border. Ever since he was a boy, Theodor longed to one day see the Everlight Kingdom. After the battle near the Sharpstones, he could've commanded his troop to a detour and see the mysterious lands of the elves. Theodor was, however, bound in service to the crown, and under oath to place his duty before personal desires. Now that a mission to the elven border had arisen, he relished the chance to make the journey. Though the endless orc and kurr hunts among the plains wore his crew thin, the urgency written in the letter gave Theodor even more incentive to hurry them to the elves' aid.

When reporting back to the military base just outside Equine—the Bareback Plains' only city—Theodor received the letter. After his first read through of the letter, he thought the way in which it had been written reminded him of his old friend—Ivan.

No doubt Ivan has risen through the ranks more than I. At the rate he was going, I'd expect he should be in charge of the whole army by now, Theodor speculated before breaking the news to his troop.

Recalling the warning written in the letter that the area they'd be riding into was dangerous, Theodor drew in the reins, bringing his horse to a halt. He could see where the edge of the Bareback Plains meshed with the forested tree line of the Everlight Kingdom. Whoever had written the letter spoke of this area as being overrun with orc and kurr forces. The letter bore no mention of a specific location where they'd meet up with the elves. It had only urged them to come to the border near the Glacial Melt Bays area.

Laying eyes on the elven forests for the first time, Theodor could see that inland from the Glacial Melt Bays grew a thick forest covering the rolling foothills of the Frozentip Mountains. The area was quite expansive. After reading the letter for a second time, Theodor thought that leaving such a vague meeting location was odd, but speculated the exact location had been left out on purpose due to the off chance that Merglan's forces would intercept the message.

Scanning the plains' abrupt end before him, Theodor began to worry that an attack might be waiting for them just inside the darkened tree line. The troop lagged behind slowly, following their commander who'd ridden ahead in order to scout out their path. Most likely there would be no ambush, but Theodor didn't make it this far in the war by just assuming everything would be okay.

He was about to ride back and select three of his men to further investigate the edge of the forest with him when Theodor suddenly heard a man's rugged voice say, *It's safe to enter the forest.*

"How do you know," Theodor replied, turning around to address whichever of his soldiers had caught up to him without him noticing. To his surprise, there wasn't anyone within speaking distance. The whole of his troop remained behind, nearly fifty yards, yet the voice sounded like it came from someone standing at his side. His head swiveled, searching for where the voice came from. The leading members of his troop rode slightly closer and he leaned back in his saddle cupping his hands around his mouth, and shouted, "Did you say something?!" He had to call twice more, over the sound of the falling rain before Theodor got the answer he'd expected. The other members of his troop shook their heads in reply.

That was strange, he thought, then the voice returned, seeming closer than before.

There aren't any orc or kurr for miles. It's safe to enter. We're waiting for you about a half-mile from the tree line.

“Who are you?! Where are you?!” Theodor demanded searching furiously for the source of the voice.

Like I said, we’re waiting for you a half mile to the east within the forest. It’s safe to continue, the voice paused, then said, *I’m surprised you don’t recognize the sound of my voice, Theodor.*

For a moment, Theodor almost went into a rage trying to discern where the voice was coming from. However, after the familiar tones of the voice found their place in his memory, a slow smile spread across his face, broadening to a beaming grin. At last he realized who was speaking to him. “Ivan! How is it that I can hear your voice so clearly if you’re half a mile away?”

I’ll explain later. All you need to know is the elf army and I await your arrival. We’ve cleared the area and it’s safe for passage, he said.

“Okay, I’ll trust you.”

Theodor didn’t know how his friend had been communicating with him so clearly over such a great distance, but he held Ivan in high regard so he led his troop onward toward the edge of the Bareback Plains.

Theodor closed his eyes and half held his breath as his instincts told him to expect a volley of arrows to come whistling out from the thick blanket of trees as they came within range. Several moments passed and Theodor peeked out through his one squinting eyelid. A quick scan made him realize that there would be no attack. Relaxing, he straightened himself in the saddle and led his men confidently over the forested border and into the Everlight Kingdom.



THE TROOP’S NUMBERS had fluctuated through the two years Theodor had served in the cavalry. At one point their division’s combined total of four hundred men dwindled to one hundred, but with the expansion of the king’s army recruiting in Westland, their numbers recovered slightly to two hundred and fifty and, due to his survival, Theodor had become one of the more experienced members in the division.

“He’s been around since the beginning,” members of his crew would tell the new recruits that were assigned to their troop.

Though it felt like a lifetime, Theodor knew the beginning wasn’t that long ago. Having his men view him as, ‘being around forever’, helped him

with his image and gained their respect. In his eyes, he thought it gave them a sense of hope that they might yet survive the end of the war.

Ivan and the elf army were waiting to greet the cavalry nearly a half-mile into the forest, just as Ivan had promised. Theodor's smile turned to fear when he saw three dragons at the rear of the elf army.

Sensing his surprise and distrust of dragons, Ivan emerged from the crowd of elves with his arms held up to grab his attention, "Don't be afraid, Theodor. The dragons will not harm you. They fight with us."

Theodor didn't respond. His mouth opened and closed, but he couldn't find the words that properly expressed his surprise. The troop watched Theodor intently as they awaited his next move.

"Come down from your horse," Ivan said, ushering him forward with a wave of his hand. "You must be tired from your journey. Come and sit by the warmth of our fire."

Ivan hesitated for a moment, looking cautiously in the direction of the three dragons. Giving in to his exhaustion and weariness from traveling, Theodor dismounted, leading his horse as he followed Ivan into their camp. Many of the cavalymen remained saddled until Theodor motioned for them to join him.

Before unsaddling his horse and letting her graze freely for the evening, Theodor asked, pointing to the dragons, "They won't eat our horses will they?"

Ivan chuckled, "Only yours, Theodor; the rest they'll leave alone."

Theodor gave him a serious glance.

"I'm joking," he chuckled again.

Once they sat comfortably around the fire, Theodor relaxed a bit, trusting that the dragons weren't going to devour them. Rubbing his hands together, he said, "Ivan, it's good to see a friendly face. It seems like a lifetime has passed since I last saw you. How've you been?"

Ivan's smile beamed brightly as he gazed at his friend from across the fire, "It's good to see you too, Theodor, I've been well. In a way it has been a lifetime, or long enough to bring a new one into this world. I'm a father now," he chuckled slightly tilting his head back.

"Wow! That's wonderful news. Your wife must be so happy," Theodor replied.

"She's pleased, but wishes it were under different circumstances. You know," he motioned to the heavily armed elves and men around them.

“Is she here? I’d love to meet her.”

“No. No, she’s back at the elves’ capital city, Cedarbridge. We’ve been living there for the last two years.”

“Is this the assignment you were given after our two-week vacation?” Theodor asked, referring to the R and R they’d won at the end of training camp.

Ivan looked to the side and squinted slightly, “Yeah, kind of,” he said, with what Theodor thought was a certain bitterness in his voice.

“Oh, it’s more complicated than that?” Theodor asked.

Ivan nodded, “After I left training with my papers, the ones saying I’d been granted a two-week R and R, my wife and I rode straight to Kingston’s marina. We’d arranged for a boat to charter us to the Kewian Islands. I was so looking forward to those two weeks on the beach,” he sighed, folding his arms and leaning hard against the base of a tree. He looked longingly into the fire’s dancing flames.

“I’m guessing from the way you look right now, you didn’t go to the Kewians,” Theodor said, tilting his head forward and cocking an eyebrow.

Ivan shook his head with a slight smile, “Nope. Once we arrived at the marina and I showed my papers to the guards, they escorted me to the marshal’s office. Can you believe that?”

Theodor gasped, “No, they didn’t.”

Ivan’s grin grew, “Sure did, right into the king’s castle. The marshal took my papers and burned them. He burned them right in front of my wife and me!” Ivan spat into the fire.

Theodor was aghast and sat with his jaw hanging wide open. “What did you do?” he asked, finally finding the words.

“I wanted to tear his head off, but my wife wouldn’t let me.”

“Why did the marshal do that to you?”

“Well, after he burnt the document, he proceeded to tell me I was instructed to leave immediately and come here, to the Everlight Kingdom. Once we’d arrive, the elves would place me into a special forces program. After the long voyage across the Marauder’s Sea, the elf king and queen greeted us with a royal welcome. It was kind of underwhelming now that I think about it, but they took us back to the capital and I began training the next day.”

“Wow, so you didn’t even get one day to relax before you started more training. That’s wild.” Theodor shook his head in disbelief. “I hitchhiked on

the Kingston Road around the whole island of Southland. I fished and met loads of interesting people all along the way.”

“At least one of us got to do what they wanted,” Ivan said, leaning his head against the trunk of a tree.

“What kind of special forces training did you do?” Theodor asked giving a glance toward the dragons.

Ivan followed his gaze. The three dragons were curled up sleeping near a fire. “I was selected as the first human to join a program where we’d be exposed to young dragons in hopes that we’d develop a bond with one of them. Only nine of us were enrolled in the program. We had six elves and two dwarfs as well. I’ve spent the last two years training with our instructors and fighting in the Dragon Wars of Nagano.”

Theodor could hardly believe what Ivan was telling him. If he hadn’t seen the dragons and heard Ivan speaking to him with his mind, he would have thought he’d lost his mind. “So it worked? You bonded with a dragon?” he asked.

Ivan nodded and pointed to the three dragons curled up in the distance, “You see the green one. She’s mine. Her name is Jazzmaryth.”

Theodor’s eyes bulged, “Do the other two have riders?”

“Yes, the dark red one is Turza; she belongs to one of the elves who was in training with me. And Norig, the purple one, belongs to my mentor, Selleya.”

“Where are the other instructors and students?” Theodor asked curiously.

Ivan frowned and shook his head, “None of them survived the Dragon Wars.”

Theodor furrowed his brow, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ivan said, pulling at the grass next to his crossed legs.

There was an awkward moment of silence, then Theodor said, “We lost two thirds of our cavalry after I joined. We’ve somehow managed to replenish our numbers back to two-fifty. When I was first assigned, we were four hundred strong. Since the new recruits have joined us, we’ve been holding our own.”

Ivan cleared his throat, “So, you must have done well for yourself to be given command of a reconnaissance troop.”

“The only reason I qualified was because I survived. Most of the others who made it just want to get through this war with their heads down and then go home. I figured, what the heck, might as well take the raise and make some more money before I’m out. They’ll give me a good pension when I’m done.”

“When will that be?” Ivan asked.

“I don’t know,” Theodor shrugged. “I’m overdue for it. I only need two years before I could leave. But when I look at these sorry sacks,” he pointed to his troop, “I just can’t force myself to leave. Maybe I’ll change my mind in a few months. Who knows? What about for you?”

Ivan shook his head, “I don’t think it will ever be over for me. My bond with Jazzmaryth is for life. As long as there is a threat to Kartania, we’ll need to face it.”

Theodor nodded slowly, leaned forward, and asked in a hushed tone, “So, is it true?”

“Is what true?” Ivan asked confused.

Theodor made a waving motion with his hands, “You know. Can you do magic?”

Ivan smiled slightly and chuckled, “How do you think I was able to communicate with you from half a mile away?”

“Oh yeah,” Theodor paused and leaned back again.

Straightening in his seat and rolling his sleeves up to his elbows, Ivan asked, “You want to see something?”

Theodor nodded.

Ivan held his palm in front of his body and pushed his hand down slowly. As he did, the fire’s flickering flames diminished, shrinking as his hand lowered. He pushed his palm down further, extinguishing the flames as his hand came to rest against the ground.

“Hey,” Theodor said objecting to the sudden chill of the evening breeze.

“Touch it,” Ivan said.

“What?”

“The logs on the fire. Touch them.”

Theodor stuck out a shaking hand and carefully placed them on the once-burning logs. “They’re cold,” he said in amazement.

Ivan nodded and Theodor removed his hand. Ivan raised his palm high up off the ground for dramatic effect. In an instant, the fire was a crackling blaze once more.

“Neat trick,” Theodor chuckled.

“I wish our job were that easy,” Ivan said, looking over his shoulder at Jazzmaryth. “Merglan’s made it hard for us.”



Chapter Nine

—

Battle

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL days, Ivan and the elves patrolled the Everlight Kingdom's borders while Theodor and his troop familiarized themselves with their new surroundings. Ivan led Theodor through the wooded area of the Glacial Melt Bays and showed him the topographical features they could use to their advantage during the coming attack. Ivan knew the orc and kurr were gathering for an attack in that area, but didn't know what, if anything, they were waiting for.

"Orcs blend in well with rock and tree bark, but stand out against the green foliage of the forest," Ivan explained to Theodor and his men while on patrol. "We'll use the trees and brush to our advantage, staying well hidden when the enemy first approaches. The fighting in the trees will be difficult because of the close range, but it can work to our advantage if the enemy outnumber us."

"Selleya, Talia, and I will be directing the movement of the elven forces and where they'll be staged. With our magic, we can sense if the orcs are near long before any of us could see them. With that advantage, we can direct more soldiers to areas with higher numbers of enemies before the battle begins. Archers will be the most effective in this scenario. With the three of us dragon riders navigating the archer's target, we'll attempt to take out the bulk of their forces before we'll ever see them."

"If we must, we'll retreat into the foothills of the Frozentip Mountains at our backs. There is less forested cover, but more fortification among the rocks. The base of the mountains will also allow us to use the slope to our advantage. We'll force the enemy to fight uphill. Elves are quick on their feet and I'll need your men to be ready to ride if we need to move. It's why I've requested help from the cavalry; horses are fast enough to keep up with the movements of the elves."

"The elves are really that fast?" Theodor asked in disbelief.

Ivan nodded.

"Do you know how far away the orc army is? And what about the kurr? You'd said in the letter that there's a band of kurr that had joined the orc army," Theodor asked.

“In the past, one of us would fly out and see where their exact location was, but as of late, Merglan’s been booby-trapping the skies around his army.”

Theodor screwed up his face and asked, “How can he set booby-traps in the sky?”

“With airmines and other spells that can be hard to detect. Once he placed a tracer spell on us. We flew over the orc army and came back to camp after our recon flight. That night the orcs attacked us while we slept.”

“Wow, this whole magician thing is serious isn’t it?” Theodor asked.

“I’m afraid so. Not quite the same as the nursery rhymes children are told when they’re babes,” Ivan replied.

“What about the other dragons? Aren’t there others that can help us?”

Ivan scratched his chin, “Dragons that aren’t bonded don’t feel strongly enough for our races to fight for our cause, especially after what the Dragon Wars did to them. They don’t want to lose more of their kin if they can help it. Besides, a bonded dragon is far more powerful than an average dragon, and Merglan’s power seems to be growing with each rider he kills. I’m not sure any of those who’d hear our plight, even if they joined our cause, would be enough to stop him.”

Theodor tried to comprehend how powerful Merglan might be, but after an extended silence, Ivan continued leading them through the forest beyond the elven border.

For the remainder of the day, the elf and human armies lay in wait for the arrival of their enemy. While they prepared for battle, Ivan told Theodor about their previous encounters with the orcs and speculated of how they might attack. While Ivan was mid-explanation and going over the different attack formations he had witnessed, something made him halt and divert his attention as he scanned the foreground meticulously.

Ivan whispered, “They’re approaching.”

Ivan quickly rushed to his dragon’s side, who stood fifteen yards from where Theodor was and Ivan had been. The host of the elf army was spread out through the trees to their left and Theodor’s troop to their right. Glancing to see how Ivan was directing the elves, Theodor realized for the first time how well the dragon blended into its surroundings. If he didn’t know the beast was hidden in the forest, he wouldn’t have guessed it was there at all. Ivan motioned for Theodor and his men to listen for Ivan’s commands.

Ivan's voice sounded in Theodor's mind, *The orcs are several hundred yards in front of us, and moving straight at our position. They know we're close. Their blades are drawn and are advancing warily. We'll wait for them to get within a hundred yards before I give the command to fire.*

Theodor looked to his men, and made sure that Ivan was broadcasting his message to all of them. They nodded to show they'd heard what Ivan had said.

Theodor's horse had been close, so he swiftly mounted his mare and readied himself for battle. Gripping his saddle horn tightly, he shifted his weight nervously on the horse. He'd never been in this position before. During larger-scale battles, he'd always been among those who'd charge in during the turning point, waiting for the foot soldiers to exhaust the enemy before clinching victory. Outside of the few large battles he'd witnessed, Theodor had only experienced small skirmishes during scouting missions where they fought off one or maybe two dozen orcs at the most. He'd never sat waiting in the trees as an entire army of orcs and possibly kurr marched directly on their position. His heart pounded loudly against his breastplate and thick beads of sweat began to drip down his face.

Pulling his bow and arrow from the quiver strapped to his saddle, Theodor nocked a long, feathered arrow into his bowstring. He recalled when Ivan told them to wait until the orcs were within a hundred yards before firing. From atop his horse, Theodor could only see thirty yards through the trees, and at best his bow could only shoot effectively up to sixty yards. If he tilted the bow skyward, he'd be able to get the extra distance needed to strike the advancing orcs, but even if he could see them, he knew that he wouldn't be shooting with any accuracy.

Suddenly, Ivan's voice rang through his mind, giving them the command to draw their bows. Theodor heard the collective stretching of the cavalry's two-hundred-and-fifty bows bending, ready to fire.

Loose!

The muffled twang of the hundreds of bowstrings all snapping tight against the air sounded near Theodor. He watched as the deadly arrows flew through the canopy of the forest, disappearing into the leafy trees. He wondered for a moment how many would make it to their intended targets and, likewise, how many would become lodged in trees. He heard howls and screams as the orcs in the distance fell victim to their arrows. The monsters' cries sounded much closer than he'd imagined they would be.

Ivan mentally commanded the cavalry to take aim once more. He waited several long breaths and gave them the command to loose their arrows a second time. Seven times they did this, until finally Theodor saw the first of the orcs break through into view.

“Fire at will!” Ivan shouted, no longer concerned about giving away their position.

Theodor began stringing and loosing his arrows in quick succession, picking off orcs as fast as his arms could move. There were too many for him and his men to shoot them all down. As soon as one would fall, two more emerged behind, rushing toward them with malice in their eyes. In a flash, the elves swept in on foot, rushing the orcs at an angle and colliding with the wall of mottled-skinned bodies. Theodor watched in horror as he saw the pure gore of battle begin to unfold before him. He ordered his men to charge.

The once clear line of elves, humans, and orcs had become blurred in the fighting. Theodor had exhausted his supply of arrows before the orcs became mixed in their ranks. Wielding a two-handed broadsword, Theodor was a formidable adversary atop his horse. As Theodor slashed from right to left through the thicket of orc bodies milling around him, he glanced around, attempting to locate his fellow cavalymen and Ivan. He couldn't see more than thirty yards through the dense vegetation engulfing them. Directly around him, the elves dispersed among the thick bodies of orcs while most of his cavalry held together in a conglomerate of horse and men. His eyes quickly scanned to where Ivan stood, wielding his sword wildly and expelling waves of energy from his palms, knocking over multiple orcs with each blast. Ivan had become completely consumed by the enemy and was taking on twice as many orcs as his entire cavalry.

Kicking his heels hard into his horse's side, Theodor urged his steed toward Ivan and the canvas of gray orc heads surrounding him. Bellowing a war cry, Theodor pointed his blade and plowed into the pile of orcs, galloping at full speed. He'd managed to penetrate deep into the swarm of orcs before his horse slowed. He slashed and stabbed faster than he knew possible. Despite his attempt to help Ivan, Theodor quickly discovered that he had only made the situation worse. The orcs' attention turned to him, their collective dark eyes peering up at him as they circled in around him. Realizing he was about to be overtaken, Theodor whirled his horse around. Spurring the steed on, he charged forward, running in a circle and clearing a

small space to ride. He continued to slash out at the enclosing orcs as he rode in increasingly tighter circles.

Ivan took notice of Theodor's predicament and as the orcs enclosed around him, he called to his dragon, *Jazz*, *Theodor is in trouble. I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment, could you help him?*

Jazzmaryth responded by leaping away from the mass of orcs she'd been taking on and gliding through the trees to Theodor's aid. She landed in the midst of the chaos, crushing those who couldn't get out of her way. She swept her long, scaled tail as she cleared a break in the orcs for Theodor and his horse to come in behind her. Jazzmaryth opened her jaws and expelled a jet of fire, roasting a line of orcs between herself and where Ivan stood. Theodor slashed through the thin wall of smoldering orcs to enter the clearing she'd created and rode to Ivan's side.

"There are too many!" he shouted to Ivan.

Ivan continued to spout waves of energy from his palm and replied, "I can't hold them off much longer! My strength is wearing!"

As he spoke, Theodor heard the deafening roar of a dragon, followed by the sweeping shadow of several dragons passing directly above the treetops. Ivan cursed and shouted to Theodor, "Go to your men and try to hold our position. If we're overrun, retreat to the foothills of mountains," he pointed behind them in the direction of the Frozentip Mountains.

Theodor nodded, turned his horse around, and spurred it on through the orc and elven ranks. Ivan ran the charred path to Jazzmaryth and swiftly mounted her. Together they burst through the forested canopy with two powerful flaps of Jazzmaryth's wings, quickly tailing the enemy dragons.

Theodor hurried his horse as he rode through to his cavalry. Once reunited with them, he led his troop in a final push against the advancing orcs. They charged into the orc ranks, battling hard to hold their position firmly. It wasn't until Theodor noticed the roaring cadence of armor-clad feet marching in from the distance that he realized the orcs had only been the first wave of the attack. When he made the realization, the collective clanging of chainmail moving in unison suddenly came to a halt in the trees beyond them.

Why have they stopped? Unless, they're about to fire on us, he thought.

Theodor shouted, his voice carrying over the noise of battle, "Take cover! Enemy archers! Take cover now!"

As soon as the last of the words left his lips he heard the uniform rush of arrows leaving their bowstrings. Raising his shield over his head, he held his breath, waiting for the arrows to descend. Like large clumps of hail tearing violently through the leaves and branches of the forest, the enemy's arrows came down on them in a flash. Theodor watched from under his shield as several arrows glanced off his horse's thin armor-plating, covering its mane. His arm recoiled at the hard pounding of two arrows lodging themselves one after the other in his raised shield. Many of his fellow horsemen weren't as lucky as he was. Theodor watched in horror as many of them were struck down and lay writhing on the forest floor.

As the last of the arrows riddled the ground, Theodor knew there'd be more to follow. He shouted to his men, "Retreat! To the hills! Retreat!"

Pulling hard on one side of his horse's reins, he spurred it hard, rushing toward the base of the mountains beyond the forest. The elves followed suit and left the fight with the cavalrymen. Once Ivan and Jazzmaryth were forced to engage the dragons, the orcs and the second wave of enemy forces had become too much.

They gathered at the top of the sloping hills beneath the mountains. From here, the enemy would have to fight them uphill. Theodor lined out his troop alongside the elves. They'd backed themselves against a cliff section near the base of the steep mountainside. From this position they could use the topography to their advantage and fight downhill, into the enemy. The cliff section at their backs ensured the enemy forces couldn't attack them from their rear. It also left them no escape, however.

Theodor and his troop waited alongside the elf army, examining the tree line below. To his surprise, no orcs emerged from the trees. He watched in the distance as Ivan and Jazzmaryth fought three riderless dragons in the sky above the forest. Ivan used the mountains as obstacles to help them outfly the other dragons. Others around Theodor gasped as Jazzmaryth unleashed a stream of flames, covering the riderless dragons in a plume of fire.

Theodor winced as the dragons projected plumes of fire at one another and became washed in flames. He expected the engulfed dragon to reel away in pain from the intense inferno, but to his surprise they didn't. Theodor didn't know that dragon scales have the ability to withstand any flame produced by themselves or any other dragon. Theodor was shocked when the attacking dragon emerged unharmed by the flames. He found it

difficult to keep his attention where the more threatening concern was—on the tree line below. Theodor noticed nearly everyone in his command had taken their eyes off the trees where the orcs were, and were watching the dragons fighting in the distance.

Theodor shouted to his men, “Keep your attention on the tree line! We don’t want to create an opportunity for the orcs to launch an attack while we’re distracted.”

This fight is far from over, he thought. While he remained watchful of where the orcs could potentially emerge from, his eyes glanced to the sky where his friend still battled three dragons.



IVAN HOOKED HIS HEELS into Jazzmaryth’s armpits as he wielded his sword and thrust it forward. His blade cut deep into one of the enemy dragons’ underside while they flew under the large beast. The dark dragon peeled off its path and spiraled down to the forest floor below, breaking treetops and limbs as it crashed fatally to the ground.

Ivan’s focus narrowed on defeating the two remaining dragons who attacked them with relentless anger. Banking tight and to the right, Ivan and his dragon collided hard into one of the pursuing dragons. Jazzmaryth bit down forcefully into the enemy’s neck. She latched her jaws in a vice-like grip to its body and kicked at the dragon’s side with her hind legs. Using her long claws, she sliced deep through the beast’s thick scales.

The fighting in the sky momentarily captured Theodor’s attention; he watched in awe and rose out of his seated position, coming to stand on Jazzmaryth’s back. Leaning forward to compensate against the wind speed, Ivan began to move, slowly at first, but faster with each step. He hurried down the length of her elongated neck and gained a decent striking position on the enemy dragon. Ivan flipped his sword so the point faced down, and violently stabbed it through the back of the dragon’s skull. Still locked in Jazzmaryth’s deadly grip, the dragon’s wings folded limply at its side as Ivan’s blade withdrew from its massive head. Ivan’s dragon unhinged her jaws and the enemy dragon slipped from her mouth, falling motionlessly to the mountainside below. The third dragon tailed them, but once its comrade fell from their grasp it sped off course toward the mountain peaks.

After the dragon fell, Theodor turned back to find the open slope between where his troop and the elves held their field advantage still clear

of enemy forces. Several of his men were still watching the tree line, but he noticed many of them with their heads craned, watching the aerial battle unfold.

“Keep your eyes on the trees,” Theodor reminded them, but he knew many would only hold their attention for several minutes before averting their attention as he had.

The third dragon flew behind a mountain peak, concealing itself from the cavalymen and elves’ line of sight. As Ivan and his dragon flew closer to the peak, a stream of fire shot out from near its tip. The flames coated Ivan and Jazzmaryth in an orange plume. Theodor worried that his friend would be badly burnt, and unable to continue the fight. To Theodor’s surprise, the orange flash of fire dissipated and Ivan sat stoically atop his dragon, unharmed by the flames. Ivan arched his sword in a hewing swing as a bright beam of energy extended out from the blade’s tip.

The dragon leapt off the mountaintop and back into view, attempting to escape the magical force of Ivan’s blade. Despite its efforts, the enemy dragon’s right wing came into contact with the beam, cutting the wing clean off its body. The dragon began to fly out of control, spiraling down as it frantically attempted to regain control of its flight path. The beast couldn’t fly properly and descended out of control toward the base of the mountain.

Realizing the dragon’s trajectory, Theodor saw it was going to collide with their ranks who were lined along the base of the mountain.

“Get out of the way!” he shouted to all those who could hear him.

Those who’d been watching the aerial battle unfold had already come to the same realization and were moving quickly away from the dragon’s crash course. The half-winged beast’s underside swung within inches of Theodor’s head before it crashed hard into the field below them. Its large, scale-covered body slid into the earth, creating a trench in its wake.

As it came to a halt, the dragon rose slowly to its feet. Shaking the debris off its body like a wet dog, it turned to face Theodor’s troop. The beast’s dark eyes swayed with the wavering of its large head as it focused a deadly glare at them. The injured dragon’s chest began to swell and glow bright with fire welling from inside it.

“Get to cover!” Theodor shouted, realizing the dragon was about to engulf them in a wash of flames.

Before any of them could react, Jazzmaryth came crashing down onto the dragon’s back, digging her claws deep into its scales. The injured

dragon craned its neck skyward and released its flames, expelling them high into the sky. Theodor shielded himself with his arm as the radiant heat from the dragon's fire flooded over them. Mid flame, Jazzmaryth opened her mouth wide and shot her neck forward like a viper striking its prey. She bit down hard on the back of the dragon's skull, crunching its head in with her powerful jaws. Twisting her head sharply, Theodor heard the enemy dragon's neck pop loudly. When she opened her mouth, the dragon's caved-in head fell flaccid to the earth and smoke billowed from its dead nostrils. She leapt off its body and glided away from the creature, landing lightly between the cavalry and elf army. Theodor's jaw hung open at the sheer power of Ivan's dragon.

As darkness fell with no sign of movement from the orcs, Theodor's men made ready for camp. They set watchmen to stand sentinel, taking shifts once every four hours.

Theodor and Ivan sat close around a warming fire as they kept watch over the battlefield while the others slept.

"They may outnumber us, but for now, we've got them scared; thanks to you two," Theodor said, looking at Ivan and his dragon.

Ivan smiled slightly, "Yeah. It's hard for me to wrap my head around it sometimes."

"You've come a long way since leading our training squad."

Ivan chuckled slightly.

After a moment of silence, Theodor recalled something that had been on his mind earlier during the aerial battle. "How is it that you and the dragons weren't burned by their fire today?" Theodor asked.

"I thought you'd be too busy fighting orcs to find the time to watch me and the dragons fight?"

"I would've been, but after we gained the uphill position they didn't come out of the trees," Theodor replied.

"They're smarter than they look, aren't they?" Ivan asked.

"Who do you mean, the orcs or the dragons?"

"Orcs."

"They must be following orders. I've never known an orc army to be wise enough to adopt a battle strategy so strictly."

"I think you're right," Ivan stated. "The other groups of orcs we've battled along the elven front would charge right up any mountainside to get to us. It worries me that they haven't."

Theodor took a sip of water from his canteen, “You didn’t answer my question. How was it that you or the other dragons weren’t burnt to a crisp by the fire like the orcs were?”

“Dragon scales are resistant to flames, unless they’re altered by magic. Most dragons and their riders will protect themselves with magical barriers as well. That’s how I was unharmed by the dragon fire. Jazz and I alter the chemical components of the fire that she expels. The altered flames can break down a dragon’s barriers and work to deteriorate the thickness of their scales.”

“You said your strength was wearing on you while you fought the orcs. How much of your energy does it take to repel fire from the dragons?”

“It depends on the ability of the dragon,” Ivan replied. “If my energy is running low, Jazz can assist me when we’re flying together. We combine our energy stores, making us more powerful. A dragon without a rider has never been able to outmatch us,” Ivan could tell by the blank expression plastered on Theodor’s face that he needed a more relatable description. “Most of the time it’s similar to fighting off someone with your sword for about a minute. If the dragon is more powerful it can feel like a ten-minute battle with each spurt of flame; it all depends. I’ve also got a few energy reserves in this necklace,” Ivan pulled a chain from under his shirt. Attached at its base hung a small light-blue crystal, gleaming in the firelight.

“What does it do?” Theodor asked.

“The elves gave it to me when we came back from the Dragon Wars. Jazz and I can place extra reserves of energy inside it and draw upon them when needed during battle. Using magic in excess takes a toll on your physical strength. The energy flowing within me can be replenished on its own, but it takes time, and often during battle there isn’t enough time to allow it to restore itself.”

“What happens if you use all that’s stored inside the crystal?” Theodor asked.

“Then it’s just down to my natural energy. If I were battling a lesser sorcerer, I could make it last for hours, but if I were battling Merglan, for example, I could make it last minutes if I were lucky.”

“What would happen if you used all the magical energy you can generate?”

“Most likely, it would kill me,” Ivan said shortly.

“So there’s a chance it wouldn’t?”

“I’m not exactly sure. None of those who’ve experienced it have survived, but I read something during my studies of a potential way to survive.”

“I see.” Theodor nodded slowly. “But nobody knows how to do it?”

“Yeah, not anyone the elves or humans know. The page that spoke of it in the text had been tampered with. It only mentioned that it might be possible, but the rest of the chapter was unreadable.”

“Well, I hope that you’re never in that situation,” Theodor said.

“Yeah,” Ivan replied.

Ivan and Theodor didn’t see any movement in the trees for the rest of their watch. When his replacement came, Theodor was glad to be relieved of his sentinel duties and get some much-needed rest.

As dawn arrived, he awoke to the sound of the elves and men gearing up for another day of battle. Gazing down to see that the orc army had lined its forces along the edge of trees, Theodor was surprised to see humans mixed in their ranks. He also noticed several large, beastly creatures towering above the orcs and humans. The tall, dark beasts resembled the stance of a human or elf. Their skin was dark and covered in black fur. They were creatures he’d only heard talk of before.

“Looks like we’re in for a good fight today,” Ivan said coming to stand alongside Theodor.

“Yeah. I see they’ve gathered some kurr,” he said, pointing toward the large beasts among the enemy lines.

“I hate kurr,” Ivan said, spitting at the mention of their race. “Half elf and half fairnheir.”

“What’s a fairnheir?” Theodor asked.

“The fairnheir are giant hounds that roam the Eastland Territories. Long ago, an elf king thought he could form a new race, superior to the elves. They’d have the wisdom and intelligence of an elf combined with the physical dominance of the fairnheir. Needless to say, his experiments didn’t go as well as he’d hoped. They turned on him and killed him and his family before racing off to the Eastland Territory. Now they’re wild creatures that lack the intelligence the elf king hoped they’d obtain. Merglan has been the first person in history to reason with the kurr and band a group of them to fight for his cause.” Ivan pointed to a kurr standing larger than the others among them, “do you see that one in the middle, wearing armor.”

Theodor nodded.

“That’s Thargon, their leader. He’s the one who convinced the members of the kurr race to fight for Merglan. I’d try to steer clear of him during the fighting.”

Theodor spent the next hour watching the orc, human, and several kurr stand steady in their attacking formations. Ivan and Theodor’s plan was to wait until they charged up the hill toward them. From their vantage point, they could pummel them with as many arrows as possible before charging down to meet them.

Ivan stood by Jazzmaryth as Theodor waited for the enemy to make the first move.

“What are they waiting for?” Theodor asked, concerned they hadn’t attacked yet.

Suddenly Ivan’s focus shifted elsewhere. He sensed a second threat approaching. Turning to Theodor he said, “They’re waiting for dragons. You’ll have to lead the charge while I’m gone.”

Theodor nodded, wishing Ivan and his dragon could lead them into battle. He watched as his friend mounted Jazzmaryth and flew out over the forest. Moments later, Theodor saw the bright lights of dragon flame in the distance.

Within minutes of Ivan and his dragon leaving, the orc army began their march upslope. It didn’t take long before they came within range of the archers. Theodor gave the command to nock their arrows. Motioning his sword in a vertical slash downward, he shouted, “Loose!” The arrows rained down on the enemy by the hundreds. He continued commanding the archers as they fired several more times at the advancing force. The hill slowed the enemy as they advanced, and Theodor was able to bring down more of the army than would’ve been possible if they’d still been fighting in the forest.

When the enemy drew near, Theodor led the charge from the safety of their position. Firing arrows freely as they rode, the humans, elves, orc, and kurr fell in great numbers as the two armies collided. As the battle raged, Theodor and his troop fought fiercely to drive the enemy back. He heeded Ivan’s warning and positioned himself clear of the armored kurr when they rode into their ranks.

Ivan battled the dragons in the distance for most of the day before he returned. The combined armies of elf and cavalry were able to hold the

enemy at bay, unrelenting in their fight. Upon Ivan's return, the enemy retreated back down the hill and into the forest. In a fiery inferno, Jazzmaryth set the borders of the forest ablaze before returning to their post atop at the base of the mountain. Theodor and his men gathered arrows as they marched back up the hill to their stronghold.

While keeping watch that evening, Theodor asked Ivan, "Are there more dragon riders who could help us?"

"There are two more, who still have dragons," Ivan told him. "They're battling Merglan as we speak on the Eastland Mountain front. He's got a large army of orcs and men fighting the dwarves and he's battling the two riders. If he gets past them, he'll be heading this way to join forces with this army. From here they'll march on the Enlightened Forest. The old magic built into the Enlightened Forest has deterred Merglan from attacking it thus far. This is the closest he's come to breaking through the elven forces. If he does he might try to force his way past the magic protecting the elven city."

"We'd better squash his army soon then, so you can get these elves to the Eastland Front," Theodor said.

"You wouldn't come with?" Ivan asked, hearing Theodor's emphasis on *you*.

"This fighting has me thinking. I've put in my fair share of time. I only needed two years of service before my enrollment ended. I've given the nations of humanity more than that. I'll fight to stop Merglan's forces here, and if we succeed, I'll be retiring."

"Where will you go?" Ivan asked.

"I liked Westland," Theodor said.

"Oh."

"The Grandwood area was particularly nice. Has good soil for crops, and it's by the ocean."

"Good fishing there?" Ivan asked, raising an eyebrow.

Theodor smiled and nodded, "Yeah; best I've seen."

"Good," Ivan said. "Maybe Hannah and I will come and visit you once our little tike is old enough to travel."

Theodor hesitated at the mention of Ivan's wife's name, "Did you say Hannah?"

"Yeah," Ivan said. "My wife's name is Hannah."

"My sister's name is Hannah."

Ivan smiled, "You don't think there's more than one Hannah in this world, do you?"

"The day we graduated training, I saw her step out of that carriage. I thought my mind was playing tricks on me, but that was her, wasn't it?"

Ivan squinted at Theodor, "I think you may be mistaken."

Theodor stared blankly into the darkness as he recalled what his father had said about the man who swept his older sister away from their family. "That means you're..." he trailed off. "Royalty," he said flatly, staring at Ivan in a new light.

Ivan looked to make sure there wasn't anyone around that could hear what he'd said. He held his index finger to his pursed lips, "Shhh. Keep it down."

Theodor's brow rose as he caught Ivan in a lie. "A-ha," he said in a less quiet tone than he meant.

Motioning with his hands for him to keep his voice down, Ivan whispered, "Alright, alright. You figured it out."

"I knew it," Theodor whispered sharply.

"Oh, you knew who I was the whole time?" Ivan asked sarcastically.

Theodor looked down at his feet, "Well, no. But I knew that was my sister who got into the carriage with you. How is she? I can't believe she's married to you. And pregnant. That means, I'm going to be an uncle," Theodor smiled brightly. "I've always wanted to be a fun uncle." He furrowed his brow again and said, "Hold on, so you're actually royalty?"

Ivan nodded slowly, "Yes. And Hannah is doing fine. She's safe back in Cedarbridge. The elves are making sure she's cared for."

"So how royal are you?" Theodor asked. He knew Ivan would still be the same person he'd always known, no matter how wealthy and prestigious his family was.

"It's not safe to talk about it here. Merglan could be listening. You already know more than you should," Ivan said.

"How could he hear us if he's all the way over in Eastland?" Theodor asked.

"You don't know what he's capable of. Know that he's made threats to kill everyone I hold dear. If you want what's best for your sister and nephew, you'll keep this to yourself and not speak of it anymore.

"Okay," Theodor said, raising his hands innocently. "But you'll still have to come and visit me in Grandwood once this is all over."

Ivan paused a moment, then nodded, “Of course we’ll come to visit. As soon as it’s safe.”

“The commute will be much faster with a dragon,” Theodor said with a smile.

“I can count on you to keep this between us, right?” Ivan asked, bringing the seriousness of his tone to Theodor’s attention.

“By my honor,” Theodor replied, holding his hand over his heart.

“Good,” Ivan said, returning his gaze back to the smoldering tree line.

Later that night, Theodor lay on his back looking up at the stars, thinking about his friend Ivan and which royal family he might belong to. His sister, who he hadn’t seen since she ran off to marry Ivan, bore his child. No doubt their child and future children would grow to be of great importance in the nations of humanity. He went to sleep wondering what their life would be like once the war was over.



Chapter Ten

Theodor and The Kurr

THEODOR LEANED OVER HIS horse's neck, its nostrils flared as the mare inhaled in short breaths that quickened in intensity as she carried him down the open slope. He'd allowed the enemy forces to advance nearly halfway up the hill before leading his cavalry to meet them. Theodor gripped the two-handed hilt of his sword tightly. In the moments just before his horse careened through the advancing enemy's front lines, he brought his freshly sharpened blade down on the heads of his muddled foes. Plowing headlong into their monstrous enemies, Theodor instantly became lost amidst the chaos of battle. He hacked and slashed as the blur of gray orcs, armored elves, and crimson cloaks of his troop became tangled in battle. Theodor's eyes caught a glimpse of something large charging toward him and he realized he'd pointed his horse straight for a large kurr, clad in dark armor. Taking a moment to identify the adversary, Theodor recognized him by the bulk and blood-stained battle axe.

Thargon, he thought as he stared down the beast.

Theodor and Thargon's gazes met, staring at each other briefly before Thargon lifted his large head and let out a monstrous growl. Keeping an eye fixed on him, Theodor hacked at several orcs while Thargon dispatched two elves with one cleave of his axe. With the path between them cleared, Thargon bore his yellow, fanged teeth and began to charge directly at Theodor. Theodor drew in a deep breath, readying himself for the attack.

Spurring his horse forward, Theodor raised his shield and pointed the tip of his blade at the hulking kurr. Just before horse and kurr met, Thargon lunged to one side, slashing out at Theodor with his mighty axe. Theodor countered, moving a hair's breadth away from Thargon's deadly swing while simultaneously piercing the point of his sword toward the beast as he rode past. Theodor's blade pierced through and cut the flesh between Thargon's armor-plated shoulder. The downward momentum of the kurr's axe drove deep into the rear quarter of Theodor's mare. The crippling blow sent her slumping to the side.

Theodor felt his horse's rear slant sideways as he leaned away from the bulk of the passing beast. As his mount fell, Theodor quickly loosened his feet from the stirrups and pushed himself out of the saddle, narrowly

escaping the crushing weight. He slammed into the ground with the middle of his back making first contact. His helmed head came next, bouncing hard against the field as he rolled downslope in a blur. The wounded horse rolled next to him, narrowly missing him as they tumbled violently across the battlefield.

Coming to an abrupt stop, Theodor lay sprawled on an open patch of grass amidst the chaos. He gasped for air as his lungs struggled to gather the breath he'd lost during the tumble. With his head ringing, Theodor managed to find his strength and rose to his feet. At his side, he noticed the writhing movements of his maimed horse. It struggled to rise on all fours, but the hack from Thargon's axe crippled the mare and she collapsed with each attempt. With the gaping wound to its rear quarters, Theodor knew she couldn't survive. In that moment, surrounded by brawling men, elves, orcs and kurr, he made a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Theodor placed his knee on the mare's neck and leaned hard to her, pressuring the horse to remain still. He grabbed his sword from the grass at her side and drove it deep into his steed's heart, ending her suffering.

As Theodor pulled the blade out from his trusty mare, he brought his gaze up to see Thargon cutting down elves who'd been following Theodor's charge. Despite their speed, the elves were unable to outfox the kurr and they fell under the powerful blows of his axe. Thargon was on the warpath and Theodor was his target. As the beast advanced, Theodor found his shield and quickly raised it. He steadied his blade and planted his feet firmly against the slope as he readied himself for the raging kurr.

If I'm going to die today, it'll be with a blade in my hand and my head held high, he thought as the large beast lumbered nearer.

Thargon's axe whistled as it swung down onto his shield, beginning the deadly dance of single combat. Blocking the wild swings of Thargon's axe with his shield and sword, Theodor held his ground against the kurr. Rolling to one side, Theodor escaped from under the vertical swinging of Thargon's axe. The beast heaved his axe deep into the ground as Theodor rolled into a crouch at his side. With his axe embedded in the grassy field, the kurr left an opening along his left flank. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Theodor slashed out and his sword cut deep into the meaty kurr flesh. Thargon bellowed as he wrenched his axe from the ground and swung it side-hand, ramming the flat of it into Theodor's raised shield. The blow

forced him off his feet and sent him several yards through the air before he returned to the ground.

Theodor slid on his side for a moment but managed to get his feet under him before losing control. He watched as Thargon's hand clutched where Theodor's sword had pierced his side. A steady stream of dark blood oozed out from between his black fingers. Smearing the blood across his chestplate, Thargon whipped his hand clean and resumed his grip on the shaft of his battle axe. He seemed to be unfazed by the wound and his tenacity struck fear into Theodor's heart.

He didn't allow the beast to make the first move. Theodor sprang into action and charged at Thargon with renewed determination. Thargon rushed to block Theodor's sword as he now switched into a defensive stance. Moving with a speed he'd never been able to achieve before, Theodor realized Thargon was taking steps backward as Theodor peppered him with blows. He sent a powerful swing at the end of a lightning-fast sequence of combination strikes that knocked Thargon's axe to the side and exposed his chest. Theodor kicked him hard with the flat of his boot, sending him toppling over backward. Theodor pounced on him like a puma and punched the base of his shield down hard into Thargon's thick skull. Fueled by the opportunity to best the beast, Theodor battered the kurr's mangled face with the edge of his shield several more times in quick succession before Thargon rolled him off to one side.

Exhausted, but still pulsing with adrenaline, Theodor sprang to his feet and blocked the heavy retaliating swings from Thargon's axe. His arm went numb from the beating on his thick oak shield. He raised it again to block yet another blow and felt the wood shield give way with a loud crack. It split in two, falling from his arm. Shocked, Theodor quickly dived away from the kurr's hacking swing. Once again, Theodor found himself at Thargon's exposed side. He stabbed wildly with his sword. The blade once again tasted flesh as it cut deep into the kurr's hamstring. Thargon crumpled to one knee, letting his axe fall at his side. Theodor retracted his sword and struck out again at the wounded beast. Thargon's arm swiped into the blade's path, blocking the sword as the sharp blade lodged itself deep into the bone of his forearm. He twisted his body to face Theodor and reached out with his free hand, closing it around Theodor's throat.

Theodor gasped for air as the kurr's strong hand gripped tighter around his throat. Not letting go of his sword's hilt, Theodor wrenched the blade

loose and brought his arm back. He stabbed forward with every dying ounce of his strength. He felt the tip of the sword slide in under the kurr's armored chestplate as it cut through to Thargon's core. He relaxed his grip for a moment upon realizing the injury, and Thargon's dark hand clamped down harder with more force than ever before. Theodor began to see small flecks of light dancing in his peripheral vision. The darkness tunneled in around him, blocking out the bright light of day. As Theodor's lungs burned for air before giving out, he forced the blade deeper into the center of the kurr, only coming to a stop when the hilt thundered against the armored front of the beast. Then the blackness eclipsed the light and Theodor saw no more.



“THEODOR, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?” A familiar voice entered his consciousness as Theodor opened his eyes. He saw Ivan kneeling over him and realized that he was shaking his body. Theodor tensed his muscles and winced; everything ached. Ivan helped lift him to a seated position and Theodor looked around to observe his surroundings. The once tumultuous battlefield teeming with orcs was suddenly calm and he realized the battle was over. Around him, the sloped hillside was littered with the bodies of the dead and dying.

Theodor attempted to speak but a sharp pain in his throat prevented any words from coming out. Rubbing his throat, he tried to speak again, but only managed dry mumbles. Shaking his head and pointing to his throat, Theodor tried to tell Ivan he couldn't speak.

You can't speak? Ivan's voice came through into Theodor's mind.

He nodded and looked down at his side. Thargon's lifeless body lay in the blood-soaked grass, Theodor's sword handle still protruding from his midsection.

Ivan reached down and helped Theodor to his feet. “Let me see,” he tilted Theodor's chin, examining his neck. The bruising around his throat matched Thargon's large hand perfectly. “Hold still,” Ivan said, muttering several elven words, Ivan passed his hand over Theodor's throat.

A sensation of warm liquid passing down his throat came over him when Ivan worked his magic on him. The warmth was shortly followed by pure relief as the pain left his body.

“How did you do that?” Theodor asked, glad to be able to speak again.

Ivan's forehead creased as he furrowed his brow, "Do I need to remind you? I'm a sorcerer."

"Right," Theodor said, and rubbed his throat where Thargon had strangled him. He bent over, gripping his hands on the hilt of his sword and placed his boot on the dead kurr's chest. Applying pressure, he slid his sword from Thargon's body.

"Looks like you got the best of him," Ivan said. "Too bad you didn't listen to my advice. You probably wouldn't have been strangled to death's door."

"I lost track of where I was in the fight. Next thing I knew he'd cut my horse from under me. From then on, it was all a blur," Theodor said, combing his dirty hand through his shaggy hair and looking around at the battlefield. "It is over, isn't it?" he asked.

Ivan nodded.

"For good?"

"It's over. For good," Ivan answered.

"What happened after I blacked out?"

"Once Jazz and I defeated the dragons, we returned to the fighting on the ground and helped alter the course of the battle. Thanks to you taking their leader out of the equation, along with Jazz and I back on the scene, our forces crushed the enemy. Not many were able to escape," Ivan said.

"Good," Theodor sheathed his sword.

"So," Ivan said.

"So, what?" Theodor replied.

"Are you really done? Retired?" he asked.

Theodor sighed, rubbing his forehead with his cuff. He raised both arms slightly and let them fall back to his side. "I'll have to return to Westland first. Then make a final appearance in Kingston. But after that," he nodded, "I'm done." His eyes moved to the field and the crowded bodies of dead elves, men, kurr and orcs. "This was more than enough fighting for a lifetime."

Ivan held out his hand and Theodor gripped it firmly. "Thank you for your service," Ivan said.

"I can't say it was always a pleasure, but I'm glad to have served with you, my lord," Theodor said, a smile curling around the edges of his mouth.

Ivan returned the sly smile and said, "If you ever change your mind, you'll always have a place in my command. But if you're serious about

retiring, I guess I'll just have to come visit you. Grandwood, right?"

Theodor's smile turned to a wide grin, "That's right. You'll always have a room in my home, now that you're family and all. And don't forget to bring my sister and my new nephew; I'd like to meet the little fellow."

"Send a letter to Cedarbridge and let us know exactly where you've settled. We'll come once it's safe," Ivan assured him.

Neither the elves nor the one hundred surviving members of Theodor's cavalry stayed long after the battle was over. Theodor and his men gathered what weapons and horses they could gather before trailing the elven army back into the forests near the Glacial Melt Bays. Once they'd ridden off the sloped terrain at the base of the mountains, Theodor and his men came to the point in the trail where they needed to turn to the west and ride back to Westland and the Bareback Plains. Theodor knew that if Ivan could choose, he would accompany them the whole way, but Ivan's duty required him to venture elsewhere. Ivan had to lead the elves to the east to more fighting along the Eastland Mountains.

Theodor lagged as he sent his troop to ride west. He and Ivan gave each other one last heartfelt goodbye before they went their separate ways. Once out of the treed canopy of the forest, Theodor turned back in his saddle to see Jazzmaryth and Ivan gliding above the trees as they headed toward Eastland. Turning his gaze around to the vast open spaces of the Bareback Plains, Theodor sighed and spurred his new gelding on.



AFTER NEARLY A WEEK'S worth of hard riding and several minor encounters with disbanded collections of orcs, Theodor and his troop reached their army's fort, stationed along the west coast of the Bareback Plains near the Statue of Old Kings. Word had spread to the generals and commanders of the king's army about Theodor and his troop's battle at the Glacial Melt Bays. Upon reaching the fort, Theodor officially submitted the resignation of his post and turned his command over to the men of his troop. His last order was for them to decide amongst themselves who would be their next commander. No longer attached to his troop, Theodor was instructed to sail on the first ship back to Kingston for his final discharge from the king's army.

Theodor discovered that Ivan had put in a good word for him about his retirement, because upon his arrival at the cavalry's headquarters in

Kingston, a large chest of gold was gifted to him for his dedicated service and valor in battle.

Holding true to his word, Theodor left Southland altogether, chartering a ship straight to Grandwood. Now that he knew where the only family member he truly cared for—his sister—was, he had no regrets about leaving his family farm behind. The fact that his father cared more about the honor of his own reputation in the community than for his own son's safety gave him the edge he needed not to return.

After nearly a month of traveling since he'd first submitted his resignation, Theodor arrived at last in Grandwood. The very day he landed in the northern coastal town of Westland, he staked his claim for some farmland a half hour's ride north from Grandwood proper. He built his stone-walled house on a hill overlooking a bay. Shortly after settling down there, he discovered that the locals referred to the area as Highborn Bay.

Once Theodor had settled into his new home, he wrote a letter to his sister and Ivan in Cedarbridge, informing them of where he had started his new life. As promised, Ivan, Hannah, and their baby came to visit Theodor. It had been nearly a year since Theodor had last seen Ivan at the battle beneath the Frozentip Mountains, and Ivan had a new surprise for Theodor. When he saw his sister, he knew that he was soon to be an uncle for the second time. Theodor had never been happier in his life. Ivan, Hannah, and their young son filled Theodor's heart with joy as they explored the area around Grandwood. During the days they'd walk along the shoreline of Highborn Bay, stroll along hills behind his house, or enjoy the sunny summer days lounging in Theodor's yard. Jazzmaryth took the opportunity to rest, bathing her scales in the sun's rays while Theodor reunited with his sister and got to know his new nephew.

When they left, Theodor felt a hole in his life he'd not been aware of until his family had gone. He was lonely and began to spend more time in town trying to make some new friends. After developing a spark with a young woman his own age, Theodor began to spend more time at the market where they'd met. She sold fishing supplies and stole Theodor's heart from the first time they spoke. It didn't take long before Theodor had purchased all the fishing gear he would ever need, and she realized he was just coming back to see her. Discovering the way Theodor must have felt to come back to her stand every day in the weekly market, Lucy asked

Theodor out on a date. Caught off his guard, Theodor stuttered and blushed, but agreed happily.

Nearly half a year passed without any word from Ivan or Hannah, and the summer came to an end turning to frosty fall mornings. Theodor sent his sister a letter asking how the birth of her second child had gone, and informing her of his involvement with Lucy, the girl he'd been courting. His letter went with no response and he was beginning to seriously worry. Winter settled in and had now begun to turn to spring. One day he returned home from an unsuccessful deer hunt to find an unmarked letter resting on his dining room table. The scarlet wax seal remained unbroken and his heart skipped a beat upon seeing the king's army's seal holding the letter shut. He quickly swiped the letter off the table and broke the seal. Removing and unfolding the parchment he read,

Dear Theodor,

I'm writing to you from Cedarbridge, the elves' capital city in the heart of the Everlight Kingdom. Sorry I wasn't able to send word sooner; my current living situation needed to remain secured from the world outside the elven kingdom. It's no longer safe for me here, and I will be coming to stay with you, in secret. It is of the utmost importance that you do NOT tell anyone of my plan to stay with you. I will be bringing your nephew as well as the new baby that has graced our lives. Ivan has instructed that I give you no further details. He's sent someone to meet with you to discuss the details of my arrival. I hope this letter finds you well. Say hello to Lucy, she sounds wonderful and I can't wait to meet her.

With all my love,

Hannah

Theodor instantly felt his protective instincts kick in and he wanted to go to his sister's side at once. If she'd already left, however, he would never have a chance of finding her. Despite his urge to leave at once, he did as the note asked and told no one of his sister's planned arrival; not even his new fiancée, Lucy. He even went so far as to burn the letter after he'd read it.

Several days after receiving the letter, a Southland merchant approached him at the Grandwood docks. He motioned for Theodor to come aboard his ship. Once in private, the merchant disclosed the details of his sister's arrival.

Two weeks later to the day, Hannah's planned arrival had come. Theodor eagerly waited with Lucy for Hannah's ship to dock at

Grandwood's port. The skies had been crystal clear when he first spotted their ship bobbing along the horizon. As it came nearer, however, dark thunder clouds began to build, and they soon blocked out the sun. Gusting winds swept the decks as the thunderhead's updraft pulled in the warm air from along the shore. The storm appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and blew the ship off its course. Unable to come to port safely, Theodor watched helplessly as the ship wrecked among the rocky wharf near Highborn Bay.

Watching the tragedy unfold before his eyes, Theodor raced down the beach on horseback. By the time he'd come parallel to the ship's wreckage, the storm had passed. As the dismantled pieces of the ship washed ashore, Theodor frantically scoured for any sign of Hannah. As he picked through the wreckage, Theodor had a terrible feeling in his gut that Merglan had something to do with the disaster. No storm had ever sprung up so fast and disappeared so quickly in the history of Kartania; not unless magic was involved.

At last a sliver of hope appeared, as Theodor heard a young baby crying. Still lulling in the surf, a lone baby lay squirming atop a plank from the ship's wreckage. He picked up the shivering babe and swept his eyes across the area hoping to find his sister, but Hannah was nowhere to be seen. Theodor brought the baby back to his home. He and Lucy worked to keep the baby safe and warm.

Theodor didn't give up his search efforts for Hannah and his two-year-old nephew. Every day he and Lucy walked the coastline, searching for some sign of his sister. Despite his efforts, he never found her or any sign of her remains. He wrote letters to Cedarbridge, trying to inform Ivan of their loss, but they too went with no response.

Theodor and Lucy eventually married and raised Theodor's nephew along with two children of their own, Thomas and Kirsten. Because Theodor hadn't heard from Ivan, he and Lucy assumed Ivan had died battling Merglan. Shortly after Hannah's tragic accident, The War of the Magicians came to an end and the evil sorcerer, Merglan, disappeared, leaving his armies to be easily defeated by the united armies of the five nations of Kartania.

A decade had passed without any word of Ivan, when late one fall evening a knock came at the door. Theodor and Lucy had already put the children to bed for the night and curiously answered to see who was there to

see them. Theodor opened the door and saw a familiar man standing in raggedy clothes, covered in what looked like years of filth. Through the guise of his long beard and tattered clothing, Theodor knew him. It was Ivan. He appeared to have gone through hell and back. Theodor nearly wept when he recognized his old friend and brother-in-law. He welcomed him into his home, but Ivan shook his head.

“I can’t stay for long,” he told Theodor, peering over his shoulder as if to make sure nobody was behind him.

“What are you talking about? What happened to you? We all thought you were dead. And your son, Anders. He is here, now. Don’t you want to see him?” Theodor asked.

For a moment, Ivan’s eyes glossed tears and Theodor thought he would weep. “I wish I had more time. Merglan’s after me. Just by being here, I’m putting all your lives in grave danger. I managed to disguise my whereabouts from him, but the effect is fading. My magical abilities aren’t what they once were. Not since...” he stared blankly past Theodor into space between himself and the doorframe.

Before Theodor could ask him what he was talking about, Ivan brought himself back to reality, “I’ve come to warn you. Merglan’s searching for something here. You must keep it safe until the elves and I can track down Merglan and stop him.”

“What does he want here?” Theodor asked confused.

“There’s no time to explain, it’s all written down here in this letter,” Ivan handed Theodor a rolled-up piece of parchment.

Theodor took the scroll from Ivan and peered blankly at it. “Why are you doing this?”

“I really must go. Just know that everything I’m doing is to stop him from harming Anders. I want nothing more than to be with my son, but if I stay any longer Merglan will discover why I’ve come here, and he will kill him.” Ivan opened his mouth to say more, but he hesitated, and the explanation Theodor was expecting never came. “I need to leave now. Theodor, I’m sorry.”

“But Ivan, wait,” Theodor pleaded, but his words went unheard as Ivan vanished into the darkness.

That was the last time Theodor heard from Ivan for many years.



**Enjoy this book? CONTINUE ON TO
THE NEXT ADVENTURE...**

[Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift](#)

A young man forced into action. A juvenile dragon alone in a new world. Whispers of a terrible evil returning to power.

19-Year old Anders lived a fairly normal life until the only family he had was taken away from him. When he finds himself forced to embark on an action packed adventure, he discovers there is more to the world than he was told. The magical force that flows within everything around him becomes reviled. Dragons, elves, orcs, and goblins lurk around nearly every turn along the path as he peruses his two kidnapped cousins.

As Anders discovers more about his family's past, he learns of their involvement in *The War of The Magicians* and the circumstances leading up to the attack of his hometown. When Anders is told about his potential involvement in a prophecy involving dragons and their powerful magic, he will need to make a difficult decision. Will he continue to follow the path that is laid out for him or can he make his own destiny? Will he ever be reunited with his family again? And if he succeeds, will he ever be able to return to the life he once knew?

Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift is the first book in an adventure fantasy series.

If you like fast-paced adventure novels, fierce dragons, powerful magic, and a hero fighting for justice, then you'll love the fantastic starter in A. J. Walker's new page turning series.

Unlock [Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift](#) to embark on this great adventure today!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A J Walker is the author of *Bond of a Dragon* series. If you would like to find out more him and the fantasy world he's created, you can check out his website ajwalkerauthor.com. Connect with A J by joining his Facebook group [here](#) or send him an email at ajwalker@ajwalkerauthor.com. Follow A J on Instagram @ajwalkerauthor.



ALSO BY A J WALKER

**Have you read all the adventures based in
Kartania?**

In Bond of a Dragon Series

Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift

A young man forced into action. A juvenile dragon alone in a new world. Whispers of a terrible evil returning to power.

Nineteen-year-old Anders lived a fairly normal life until the only family he had was taken away from him. When he finds himself forced to embark on an action packed adventure, he discovers there is more to the world than he was told. The magical force that flows within everything around him becomes revealed. Dragons, elves, orcs, and goblins lurk around nearly every turn along the path as he pursues his two kidnapped cousins.

As Anders discovers more about his family's past, he learns of their involvement in *The War of The Magicians* and the circumstances leading up to the attack of his hometown. When Anders is told about his potential involvement in a prophecy involving dragons and their powerful magic, he will need to make a difficult decision. Will he continue to follow the path that is laid out for him or can he make his own destiny? Will he ever be reunited with his family again? And if he succeeds, will he ever be able to return to the life he once knew?

Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift is the first book in an adventure fantasy series.

If you like fast-paced adventure novels, fierce dragons, powerful magic, and a hero fighting for justice, then you'll love the fantastic starter in A. J. Walker's new page turning series.

Unlock *Bond of a Dragon: Zahara's Gift* to embark on this great adventure today!

Bond of a Dragon: Secrets of the Sapphire Soul

A dragon and her rider put to the test. Betrayal among allies. With Kartania's fate in the balance, who will take control?

Anders knows the war to stop Merglan from reclaiming his grip on the world is just beginning. With no certainty about where or when Merglan will attack next, Anders and his companions must take action to stay one step ahead of the cruel sorcerer and his evil dragon.

As he searches for ways to stop Merglan's domination of their world, Anders discovers more than he expected. With several nations of Kartania on the brink of collapse, he must make a difficult decision. Is the young rider ready to deal with the consequences he's facing? Can Anders overcome the odds and unravel the secrets of the sapphire soul?

Bond of a Dragon: Secrets of the Sapphire Soul is the second novel in an adventure fantasy series.

If you like gripping suspense, bold dragonriders, and page-turning action, then you'll love A J Walker's latest installment in the *Bond of a Dragon* series.

Find out more at ajwalkerauthor.com



DEDICATION
To Bubba and Ruby.

Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever A J Walker publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-PSDH-FSRV>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.